

This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

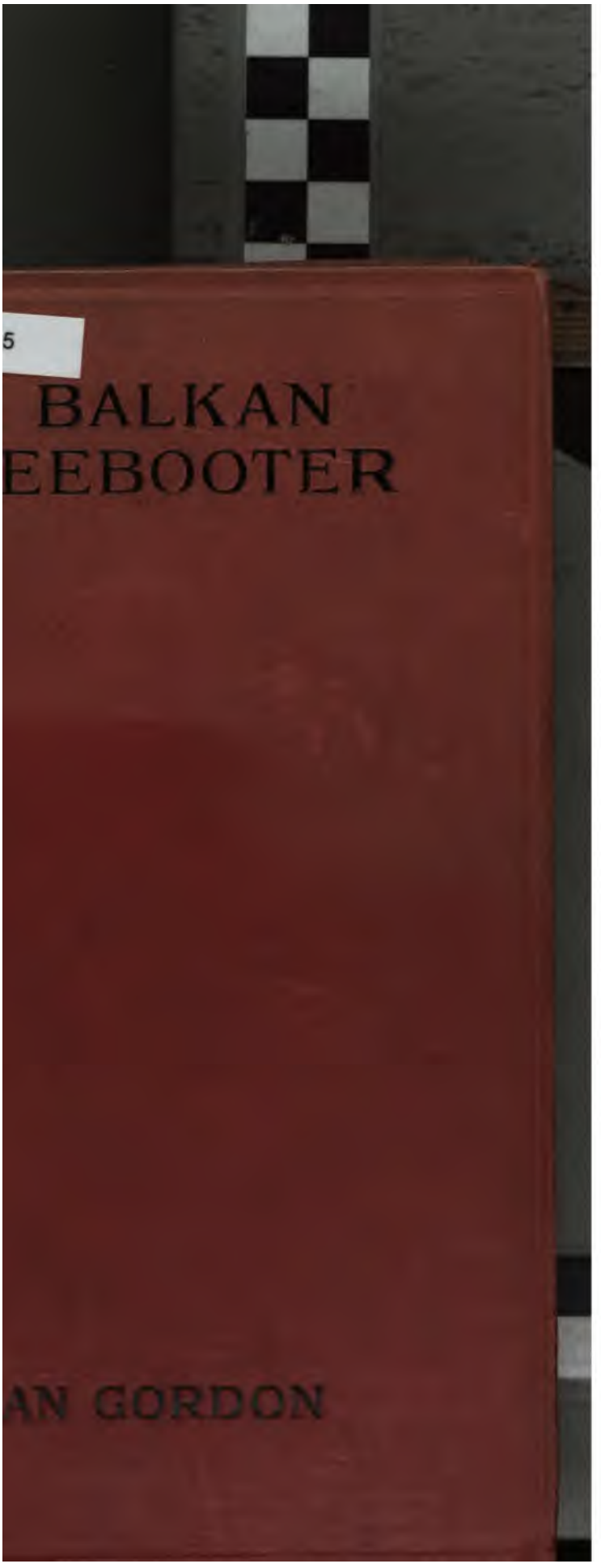
+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

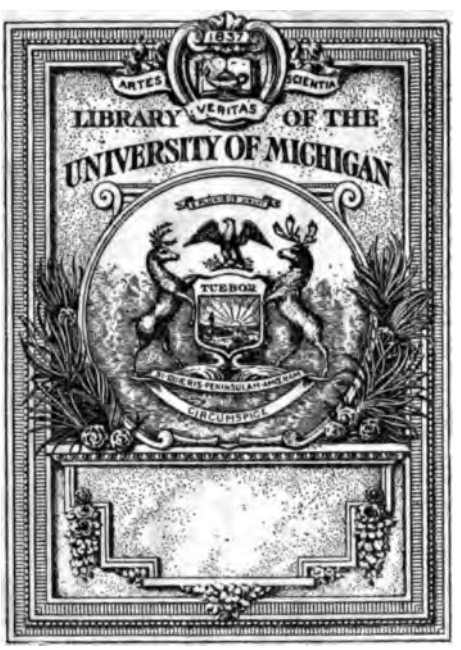
+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`


5
BALKAN
EEBOOTER
AN GORDON

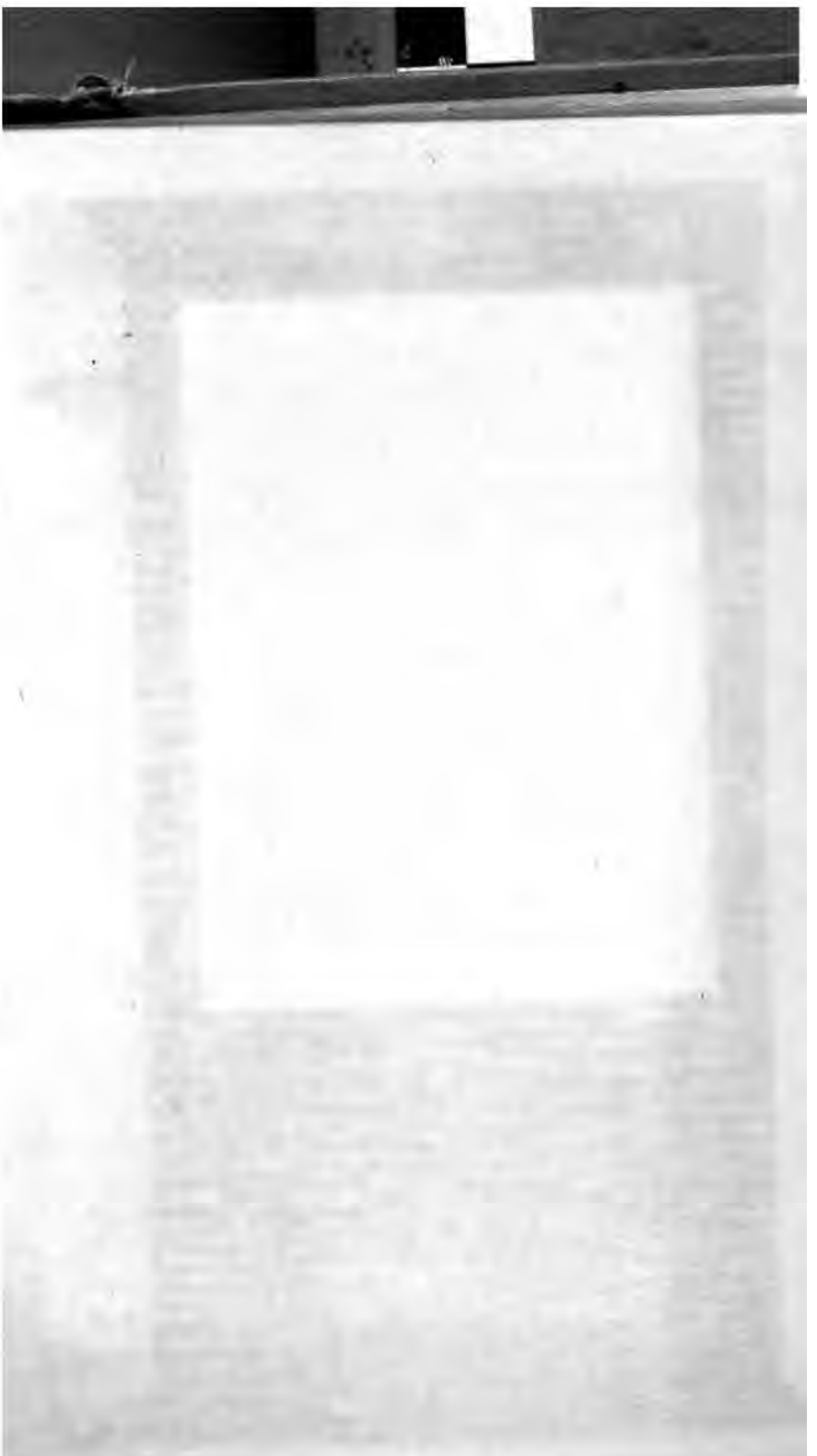



ARTES
VERITAS
SCIENTIA
LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
TUEBOR
CIRCUMSPICE



DR
22
.G66









A BALKAN FREEBOOTER

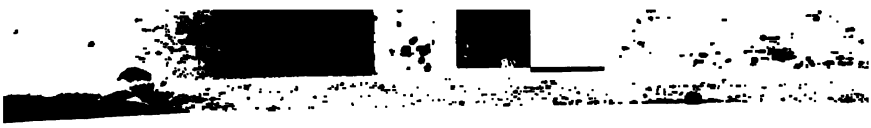


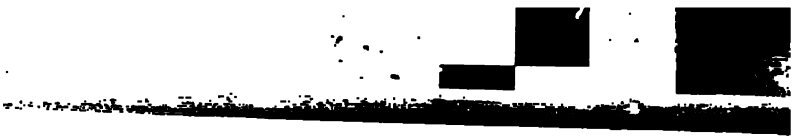




PETKO MORITCH IN COMITAJ COSTUME.

From a Sketch from Life.





A
BALKAN FREEBOOTER

BEING THE TRUE EXPLOITS OF THE SERBIAN OUTLAW AND COMITAJ PETKO MORITCH, TOLD BY HIM TO THE AUTHOR AND SET INTO ENGLISH



BY

JAN GORDON

JOINT AUTHOR (WITH MRS. GORDON) OF "THE LUCK OF THIRTEEN"

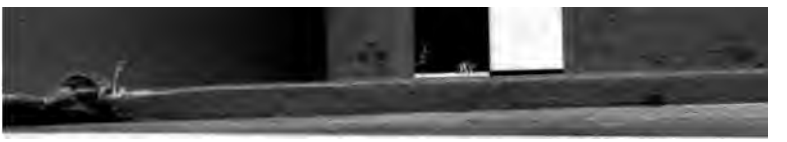
WITH A PORTRAIT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE
1916





PRINTED BY
WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED
LONDON AND BECCLES, ENGLAND



"THE BANDITS' SONG"

Ни мање смерти од глади има
А особито међ орловима.
Орао слети одосго снебар,
Оуграби доле све стому требар.
Писне у грачни крилима стреса
Свему живоме прети с'небеса.

KING NICHOLAS OF MONTENEGRO.

Mid Eagles
Few there be who die
Of hunger.
What each needs he takes
Swooping from the sky.
And at his cry
The timid quakes.
And when he shakes his wings
The fear of death
Creeps in low earth-born things.

AUTHOR'S TRANSLATION.

395923

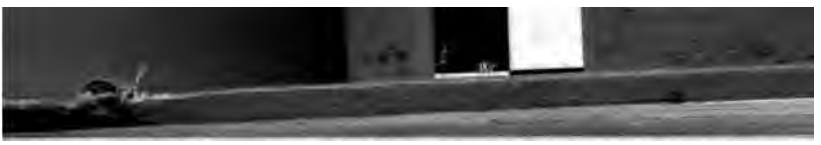




CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	CONCERNING PETKO MORITCH	ix
I.	IN 1889	1
II.	THE ESCAPE	17
III.	THE HONESTY OF CRISTICH	37
IV.	TWO CRIMES	46
V.	TWENTY COPECKS	64
VI.	IN BELGRADE GAOL	82
VII.	THE ESCAPE FROM TOPCHIDA	92
VIII.	THE BETRAYAL	111
IX.	A SERBIAN BRAVO	127
X.	INTO BULGARIA	143
XI.	GOOD SAMARITANS	153
XII.	DARA AND ZHIVKO	172
XIII.	PETKO IN ROUMANIA	188
XIV.	GEORGITCH	219
XV.	THE COMITAJ	228
XVI.	GLIGOR SOKOLOVITCH	249
XVII.	A TURKISH CAPTIVE	273
XVIII.	INTO MONTENEGRO	302





CONCERNING PETKO MORITCH

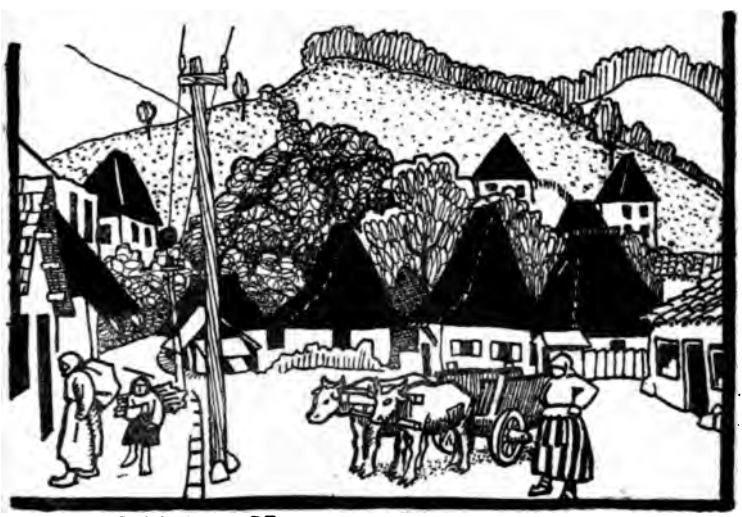
In order to understand this history of Petko Moritch, and to come to a just appreciation of his character, it is necessary to know something of the conditions in which he lived and under which he was brought up. Serbia, a fertile country of hills and small level valleys, had just struggled from the crushing suzerainty of the Turk, who still ruled over "the Sanjak of Novi Bazar" and over Macedonia. I imagine that slavery under Turkish jurisdiction is not quite the education to bring out those more delicate perceptions of justice and of honesty on which we highly cultivated nations pride ourselves, and in fact, Kara George, the brave, himself — the first great successful liberator of Serbia—was, according to Western notions, a callous scoundrel, for he shot his own father—so the tale runs—through the head, and bonneted his mother with a hive of bees. Unable to keep his country against the Turks, he fled into Austria in 1813. The succeeding period of Turkish rule was ended by Milosh Obrenovitch, also a farmer like his predecessor, who gained the

confidence of the Turk and then betrayed it, raising the banner of revolution at Takova on Easter Sunday, 1815, while in 1817 he enticed Kara George into the country and had him beheaded. The country was henceforth divided between the two factions, one of whom favoured the Obrenovitch family and the other the Kara George descendants, and Milosh was in continual danger of assassination for he was an Austrophile, and the peasants, mostly in sympathy with Russia, could clearly see the disadvantages under which their brethren, still subjects of Austro-Hungary, lingered. Each party tried by bribery and corruption to get the ascendancy, but by 1868, when Milan ascended the throne—the year in which Petko Moritch was born—the Obrenovitch and the Pro-Austrians were firmly established.

To turn from politics to the particular, Petko Moritch was born in Uzhitze, a small town of quaint wooden-roofed dwellings in the north-western corner of Serbia. His father was a fairly well-to-do cattle dealer who, when the child Petko was about five years old, moved to the little village of Kosevitch near by. The new house was a very small square low-roofed dwelling of three rooms, including the kitchen, and here one year later the child's mother died. The father married again in eighteen months, and the step-mother adopted Petko as her own, bringing him up with

loving care. The Turkish war broke out a year later, and the father marched off, leaving the mother, Petko, and a new baby to get along as best they could on his small savings.

Books and newspapers were, of course, non-existent in those times, and in the long winter



A SQUARE IN UZHITZE

evenings the peasants would sit about the fires—built on the floor of the cabins and without a chimney—telling tales or singing songs, for the instinct for poetry is inborn in them. The songs and the tales dealt with the exploits of the heroes of the Serbian Romance, "The defeat at Kossovo," of the exploits of Marko Kralievitch, or of the deeds of brigands and robbers and of such men as Kara George and Voivoda Velko, his chief general, and



Stephen Singelitch. The subject matter was either bloodshed, or ingenious robberies, or other daredevil exploits, and upon such strong meat the infant morals were fed, producing naturally a point of view somewhat estranged from our own.

When Petko's father returned from the wars he was a ruined man, his farm and all his savings were gone, and he was forced to descend to the trade of butcher in order to live.

At the opening of this story the disastrous Bulgarian war also was over, and owing to National pressure the Radicals, or pro-Russian party, were for a short while in power. Petko himself had done his short military service (an elder son served only five months), and he had resumed his employment as general manager for a merchant in the village of Chachak, where lived his widowed sister.

Just before Petko began his adventures, the Brothers Soldatovitch, the last two great Serbian heroes, had for eighteen months defied the "Naprednjak" party, purging the districts of Uzhitza, Valievo, and Rudnik from the criminal officials, and had at last paid the penalty of death. Some day I hope to write their story.

The art of the writer resembles in many ways that of the lapidary. Plucked from the matrix of humanity, the rough specimen is much as all his fellows—observed from the outside, ordinary enough—so much clothes, so much flesh, so much



hair, and it is the duty of the tale spinner to penetrate with the wheel of experience into the glittering interior, producing facet after facet, each of which adds to the fire of the hidden spirit until the gem is at last revealed. The skilful lapidary must know his stones, his facets must be cut so that from any example the best proportioned jewel may be produced, so also the writer. Considering these reminiscences of Petko Moritch, I am embarrassed. In dealing with a fictional character, the facets can be carefully prepared beforehand, but when one is treating real life, and that in a limited space, it is often difficult to determine what to retain, what to reject. I would keep "that"—good, but "this" is equally important; then "the other" must be left out. My notes on Petko's career cover some eighty-five pages of condensed writing, which would expand, with no effort on my part, into a book of some one hundred and eighty or two hundred thousand words, a length which no reader would peruse even if I could find publisher unsophisticated enough to print it. I have, therefore, exercised my discretion in selecting those incidents which throw the most light upon his character and upon the days of which I am writing.

I think I should state quite definitely that these adventures are *not* invented. Petko Moritch is a living man, and I met him in Serbia. A chance word led to the tale of his adventures and



mishaps, and I have merely set them into English and, I hope, made them solid. The names, including Petko's, for the most part are, of course, fictitious, with the exception of historical or well-known people.

September, 1916.



A BALKAN FREEBOOTER

CHAPTER I

IN 1889

THE old bridge, built by the Turkish road maker, was of stone, springing from either side of the swiftly running muddy river, and the single wide semi-circle of arch carried the apex high above the normal level of the roadway which was forced to climb a gradient to the coping stone, whence it fell as steeply to the farther bank, making the whole bridge look not unlike the meeting of two flying buttresses, having lost the church which should have been between them. At one end of the bridge was a small wooden shelter in which a fire was burning. Over the fire sat the old Serbian toll collector, humping himself in his heavy sheepskin coat and cap till he seemed like a great bear escaped from the woods. The road was deep in mud, for the flat stone paving which the Turks had laid on the unstable earth had long since disappeared. Occasional oxcarts or pack-laden donkeys passed along the road, toiling through the mud, and from



each driver the bridge-keeper collected his meed of halfpence ere he allowed him to go on his way.

Presently a walker came, stepping swiftly on the firmer edge of the road. He was a tall man, twenty-one years of age, with keen kindly brown eyes and curly dark hair which escaped from beneath his black fur cap. He walked with the loose limbs of an athlete, now and again springing over a puddle of mud, with graceful elastic ease. His skin was dark and on his brown face his eyebrows, nose and moustache drew a regular firm pattern like an "H." As he drew near to the shack, he cried, a full throaty cry: "Ohee, Marko."

The toll-collector rose to his feet clumsily, like an animal, and came to the door of the hut; even standing he looked scarcely less bearlike, for the great shaggy cap came down to his eyebrows, and his beard crept to his cheekbones, and hair and sheepskin mingled over his chest.

Petko Moritch, the walker, came up to the shack, and bending down, entered. He held his fingers out over the fire for a moment, then pulling a carved wooden box from his pocket, he extracted thin rice paper and swiftly rolled a cigarette. He handed the box to the bear, who imitated him with clumsy knotted fingers.

"Well," said Petko.

The bear pulled out a leather wallet and counted out a sum of money.



Petko put it into his pocket.

"Have you any coffee?" he demanded, "it's cold, Marko."

"It's colder sitting here all day," said Marko, bringing out a small copper vessel, narrow at the mouth and wider at the base, with a long iron handle. He filled it with water and set it in the embers while he turned the handle of an old brass Turkish coffee mill.

"Any news?" he asked, "Zhivko the speaker was across here yesterday."

"Curse him," cried Petko, his handsome face flushing, "he's a scoundrel."

"Aye," said Marko, "I've no doubt he's got some fine lies to tell the people."

"His mouth is as full of lies as his head is empty of honesty," said Petko.

The man under discussion, Zhivko Sajitch, was a lecturer for the pro-Austrian party. Serbia had struggled from the tyranny of the Turks, only to fall into a worse tyranny, a tyranny of her own people. Milan Obrenovitch, the King, was a weak tyrant, he was a bought servant of Austria, and all his efforts were applied to the work of bringing Serbia as a fief under the Austrian rule. With him were associated a band of sycophants and courtiers who called themselves the Conservative party, united in the same aim, the subjection to Austria. The Serbian peasant is no fool in politics, he could see how his brothers fared in those parts of Hungary which

the Austrians ruled, and he had no wish to suffer a similar fate. But his efforts were of small avail, for the Conservatives used their power to the full, and with Austrian money, bought and bribed witnesses to trump up charges against any peasant who dared to stand in their path. The failure of the first Bulgarian war had, however, given the people a small liberty, and for one glorious moment, the Radicals were in power, the country breathed in temporary freedom, looking towards Russia for their eventual and final enfranchisement. But the Conservatives were again becoming active, and backed by the King, and the Court, fresh injustices and oppressions were being committed.

"Eh, Zhivko's a bad man," said Marko the bear, shaking his furry head, "you remember, Petko, how he swore falsely against his brother, and got him fifteen years, so that he could steal the farm."

"If I catch him, I'll punch his head," said Petko.

"You'd better be careful," counselled Marko.

"That's all right," retorted Petko, "are not the Radicals in power? If I punch Zhivko's head I'll get praises, not punishment." He lowered his voice—"I heard them saying—— "

"Who?" asked Marko.

"Never mind," answered Petko, "I heard some of the big men at Chachak say that it would be a blessing to punch Zhivko's head. I'm going to do it."



"He's strong," said Marko, then hastily, "but so are you. I heard about you last Fair day at Chachak, jumping over a bullock cart laden high with wood, phew."

"That's nothing," cried Petko, standing up and swinging his arms. "I used to jump over the tallest soldier in our Regiment at Uzhitze with a belt coiled on his head."

"Yes, I heard of that too," said Marko, admiring the physique of the young man. "I remember Yovan Soldatovitch when they shot him at Uzhitze. Eh, he was a fine man. Seven shots went into him, brother, and he opened his chest and showed his heart, crying, 'Here's where you must shoot, brothers.' I saw it. There are still men in Serbia."

"Well, thanks for the coffee," said Petko, bending out beneath the doorway.

Marko watched him with foreboding.

"If he goes punching Zhivko he'll get into trouble," he muttered. "Those cursed Conservatives will get at him somehow. They're like snakes. I'd sooner go up Kablar, hunting wolves with my bare hands."

He re-entered his shack, shaking his furry mop.

Petko Moritch strode along, his head in the air.

"When I catch Zhivko I'll punch him so that he can't open his mouth for a month," he swore to himself. He swung into a small village, the few

houses which comprised it were low and white-washed, with great high-peaked black roofs like witches' caps. Women were walking between the houses, bearing baskets and staggering under great wooden butts of water. Petko cried to one, "Ohee, where is Yanko?" The woman made a motion with her thumb, an international gesture.



"He's over there," she shrilled. "Zhivko Sajitch is holding a meeting."

Turning a corner, Petko came upon the assembly. The peasants were gathered in an open field, and in their midst a square man was standing on a country cart. He was shouting fierce

accusations against Russia and against the Radical party, twisting real events in a cunning manner.

Petko pushed into the crowd, shouldering them in his eagerness. Some turned round angrily at his intrusion.

"What are you lying for?" yelled he.

The speaker stopped suddenly, and his mouth closed, fat folds of displeasure appeared round the corners and ran beneath the lower lip.

"Who says I'm lying?" he snarled.

"I do," cried Petko, from the midst of the people.

"You come here and I'll show you if I lie," shouted the speaker.

"I'm coming," cried Petko.

He reached the carriage, and with one sweep of his arm flung the speaker to the ground. The man fell into the arms of the crowd, cursing and calling horrible insults on Petko's family. The peasants drew back. It was not their business. As the speaker recovered his balance, Petko leapt upon him, hitting him in the face. Gendarmes pushed in from every side. They dragged the impetuous youth from his beaten opponent and pinioned him.

"Leave me alone," cried Petko furiously, "let me punish the liar."

The speaker rose to his feet. His mouth was bleeding from a blow. He stared hate at his assailant.

"I'll get you ten years for this," he shouted angrily.

Petko spat at him.

"You won't get me ten days," he retorted, "for punishing a liar. Go home and learn to fight, Zhivko. We don't want balloons of gas in Serbia, we want men."

The peasants giggled. The speaker glowered about him.

"You come away," said the gendarme pulling Petko by the elbow.

Petko laughed as he trudged back to Chachak in custody. He remembered that, in the talk which he had overheard, more than a suggestion was made that the assailant of Zhivko wouldn't receive a very strenuous sentence. He walked into the police clerk's office with the laugh still on his lips.

"What has he done?" asked the official handling a pen.

"Oh, I just punched Zhivko Sajitch for lying," said Petko.

The official grinned; he, too, knew the political opinions of the district.

"You'll have to go to gaol to-night," said he.

"Good," answered Petko. "I'll sleep there as well as anywhere."

The cell was a low, whitewashed room; on one side was a low truckle bed and above this a small barred window about seven feet from the ground.



Opposite the window was an iron stove like a bee-hive in shape—bound about with thick hoop-iron riveted together—fired through a tube from the passage outside. In spite of the cold weather it was not alight. Petko stretched his arms. "All right," he said, "bring me a blanket and make a fire." He slept a dreamless sleep. Was he not under the protection of the officials?

The next morning the gaoler put his head in at the door and grinned at Petko.

"You're in trouble, my boy," he said nodding.

"I don't think that trouble will weigh long," answered the prisoner laughing.

"Well," said the gaoler, "don't you be too sure. Your friends got dismissed last night."

"What!" ejaculated Petko.

"Awkward, isn't it?" said the gaoler. "The Ministry has changed. Telegram came. All the officials are to go. Brother Zhivko is up."

"Curse," said Petko.

"Just so," agreed the gaoler in a friendly tone, "and Yevto Markovitch, you know, the miller, was murdered yesterday." He made a significant movement with a finger across his throat. "Robbery."

"What of that?" said Petko.

"They say you did it, that's all," went on the gaoler.

"Well, you know that's a lie."

"That's as it may be," answered the gaoler, "but it's going to make trouble all the same."

"The swine," said Petko.

When the gaoler had gone he sat down on the bed and worried the question. His political support was gone. The Conservatives were in. They could make it unpleasant for him, for with the change of ministry all the country officials would change—two or three months at least he would get—but this trumped up murder charge . . . of course, that was absurd. Swear a man's life and liberty away just because he opposed your politics. . . . But those were their tactics.

In the afternoon, confronted with the Islednick, Petko laughed, but this time the police clerk did not laugh with him; the protection was gone—the police clerk was a sycophant, he frowned.

"It's no laughing matter, Petko," he said angrily. "You are accused of murdering Yevto Markovitch, before your unwarranted assault upon Gospodin Zhivko."

"You know it's a lie," retorted the accused, staring disdainfully at the clerk.

"There was the money in your pockets," answered the accuser.

"That was from the bridge tolls," said Petko. "I was taking them to my master."

"So you say," answered the police clerk.

"We can get witnesses," sneered Zhivko, who was standing grinning with malevolence in a corner.

"Oh, you can get them, I've no doubt," retorted Petko. "Some Serbs can always be bought."

"Take him away," ordered the clerk. "Put irons on his feet. We cannot allow such dangerous criminals to go free."

"Irons!" cried Petko.

"Yes," said the police clerk, "all criminals accused of murder must wear irons."

Zhivko laughed. Petko flushed dark red with anger.

"All right," he said, "put irons on." He stared at Zhivko, who could not meet the indignation in his gaze but glanced sideways. "You look out when I catch you outside, you dirty pig."

Back in gaol Petko sank on the bed, black anger in his heart. The fetters on his feet, fastened about his ankles with soft iron rivets, clanked when he stirred. He sat for some time staring before him. The stove filled his vision, and presently he found that unconsciously he had been examining its details with a microscopic intensity. The strong iron bands which encircled it in every direction were buried at the ends in the masonry of the walls. He noticed that a rivet in one of the iron bands was loose. With his fingers he twisted the loose rivet and presently drew it out. The iron trace could then be drawn a little away from the stove itself. Petko played with an idea which had come to him, and slowly his determination to escape strengthened. He would show them if they could shut him in like a frightened sheep. When the

dusk had deepened to night and the stove had begun to cool down he picked up a billet of stout wood which had been left in the cell, and as quietly as he was able began to lever out the loose end of the iron band. It was very strong. In spite of his precautions, he could not avoid noise. After a while somebody hammered on the partition wall between the cells. The prisoner next door cried—

"Hola, there, what are you doing?"

"You shut your mouth," cried Petko, "this is not your business." And he set to work with renewed energy, fearing that the gaoler would interrupt him, but ready to use the billet as a club if necessary. Now it happened that the gaoler was a married man, his wife had a small house in the outskirts of the town and knowing that no dangerous prisoners were locked up in the gaol, he had taken "French leave" for a short visit to her. The prison was left without a custodian. In a short while Petko, exerting the full of his strength, had demolished the stove. The prisoners were now shouting at the top of their voices, terrified lest they should be accused of complicity. Petko, armed with his billet, clambered through the firing flue into the narrow corridor, chequered with the cell doors. At the far end the warders' room was faintly illuminated. Petko crept down the passage. Peering through a crack he saw that the room was empty, through it he passed into the gaol yard. There was a wall round the yard, but it was not

high and in spite of his irons, he sprang on to the top. For a while he lay in the cold night listening, but there was no sound of sentry or of gaoler, so he



dropped into the ditch and made his way across the fields. The irons impeded his movements and he was forced to move slowly because of the clanking. Thus he went for more than a

kilometre; a half-built house loomed dark against the sky.

* * * * *

Petko awoke from a disturbed slumber, shivering in the dawn. Above his head the naked rafters of the unroofed house made a black fretwork against the glowing sky. Unable to go further, or to divest himself of his irons, he had clambered on to the half-covered beams of the second story, where he now lay, listening to the distant sounds of the awakening town. It was bitterly cold, the wind blew straight from the snow-covered hills of the Yelitza Planina, and whistling through the open windows of the unfinished villa, bit down to his very bones. His teeth chattered, and the irons about his ankles seemed to grip him with the chill hands of a skeleton, spreading the cold in waves all over his body. After a while he heard cries and shouts and later could distinguish the calls of search parties, who were scouring the country.

"Ohee," they shrilled, "can you see anything?"

"No—o—o."

The calls drew near, quite close. A gendarme stumbled into the villa, tripping on a beam lying across the floor, and cursing in sweeping Serbian anathema. Petko heard a rifle fall on the ground. He held himself with all his will, so that his teeth should not rattle so with the cold. The searcher

scanned the interior and convinced that no man with irons could have climbed to the second story, went away. Petko heard from the distance—

"Ohee, nothing?" And the answer, "Empty house, only half built."

The cries faded, growing fainter and more distant, at last to be lost in the murmur of the countryside.

All day Petko shuddered in the empty house, and in the evening, after dusk had fallen he clambered down, by the aid of holes and cracks, till he stood once again on the ground. He hesitated for a moment at the door to get his bearings. The river was his objective. On the river bed were big stones and with them he might break the shackles. But to get to the river it was necessary to pass quite close to the gaol. Well, he would risk it. Dusk would fall about five, by eight he could venture, at the time when the police should be having their supper. He crept back the road he had come.

As he neared the gaol he went with more caution, but suddenly a figure appeared out of the darkness.

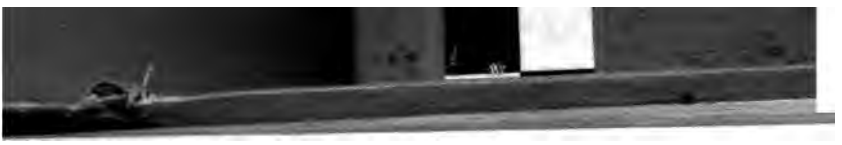
"Halt! who goes there?"

Petko sprang, but before he could reach the gendarme, other figures appeared. They hurled themselves on him. Impeded as he was by the irons, he could not escape. He was flung down and

pinioned. He fought and bit and swore, but the gendarme laughed. . . .

Bruised and angry he sat in a new cell, listening to the tramp of the policeman patrolling the passage, beyond his door.

Tramp, tramp, tramp.



CHAPTER II

THE ESCAPE

THREE days later Petko was transferred from the police cells to the county gaol, to await his trial for the murder of the miller. More liberty was given to him, his sister was allowed to visit, and as he had received money, he was allowed to buy from the town, through the gaoler, any pretty luxury he might desire. He was no longer in solitary confinement, two other companions shared his cell. The first, Cristich, was an oldish man with refined features and an air of dignity, the second, Michaelo, a dark heavy-faced bandit, who was under sentence of death, and who was reputed in legend to be one of the strongest of men in all Serbia. Cristich was what in England would be President of a Local Government Board—of a community of four villages—a most energetic radical, and his political opponents had trumped up a false charge against him. He was accused of killing a peasant and of stealing a barrel of cheese. In spite of his evident honesty, the judge was forced to condemn him to twenty years penal servitude, for the witnesses had been well bribed and trained, and unfortunately,

the accused had no alibi—not that an alibi would have mattered excessively.

When the weather was fine the prisoners assembled in the open yard; on rainy days they were herded into a large square room which was at one end of the prison. They played games and sang and told stories to pass the weary time. Petko's attempted escape, fine physique and personal attraction soon made him a favourite amongst his fellows. He was not so popular with the gaolers, they feared he might make yet another evasion.

One day the chief gaoler came to him as he lounged in the yard watching a game of cards. The gaoler stared at him, Petko returned the stare.

"You think you're a fine boy, don't you?" sneered the gaoler.

"Perhaps," said Petko grinning.

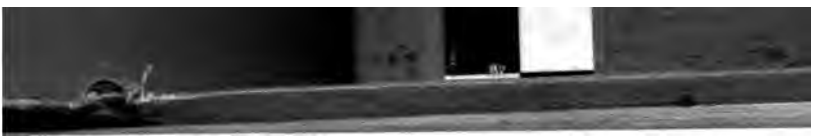
"Well, you try and run away from here, brother, and you'll see what you get."

"It's what you'll get," said Petko, "the other gaoler got a year, I heard."

"You try and get out of here then," retorted the man.

"I will if I want to," said Petko.

"Yah, you ought to wear a woman's apron," jeered the warder getting angry, "think you're a man, why, your mother was . . . " he spat on the ground. "If you get out of here . . . why I'll



take a woman's distaff and spindle and weave myself a new set of underclothes."

Petko took an easier, more lazy position.

"If I don't get out of this rotten prison, and right away from your wretched warders, you may put your apron on me," he drawled, "and I'll wash your underclothes too. There!" He grinned at the infuriated warder and turning his back lounged away. The warder shouted curses after him.

That evening Petko said to the others in his cell—

"Look here, brothers, I'm going to escape. That fool of an Ilya dared me. Will you join? It is easy enough. Cristich, you aren't going to do your twenty years for nothing, are you?" Cristich nodded (Serbians nod for no). "Michaelo, you're a dead man if you don't get away." Michaelo grinned a dark grin.

"I'll come sure enough," he said.

"It's quite easy," said Petko. "Cristich has a dagger and we can easily steal a table knife from the meal time. We can make a file good enough to saw through the shackles. I noticed that the lock of the door isn't very strong. Michaelo can bend that up till it's nearly broken. When the warder comes by we'll burst open the door, knock him down and then we're off."

They shook hands. The escape was fixed for Sunday and in the meanwhile fetters were sawn and the door lock weakened, and the fetters rubbed

with oil and soot to prevent the cuts from shining.

A very small thing aroused Petko's suspicion—a glance—it was only a quick, furtive exchange, a



flicker of understanding between Michaelo the bandit and the gaoler, but it awakened a host of doubts in Petko's mind. Was it possible, he wondered, that the bandit had betrayed them? Beneath seemingly careless lids he watched the



gaoler, and the man seemed swelling with an inward satisfaction. But, thought Petko, why then does he not arrest us and examine our fetters? He engaged Michaelo in conversation and tried to plumb the brigand's eyes, but Michaelo would not meet his glance. Now and again, turning suddenly, Petko caught the tail of a malicious grin vanishing from the gaoler's face. Towards the evening he was sure they had been betrayed. Cristich was playing cards and no chance of even a whispered word had occurred when they were locked up for the night. It was quite dark in the cell; presently came the sibilant hiss of Michaelo—

"Well, are we going now?"

Petko groaned.

"I feel so bad, fever has been coming on. I can't go, brothers." He heard Michaelo sit up in the darkness.

"But it was arranged," he muttered angrily.

"Yes, but curse this fever. We shall have to put it off, Michaelo."

Michaelo swore quite naturally.

"We can go to-morrow night," said Cristich.

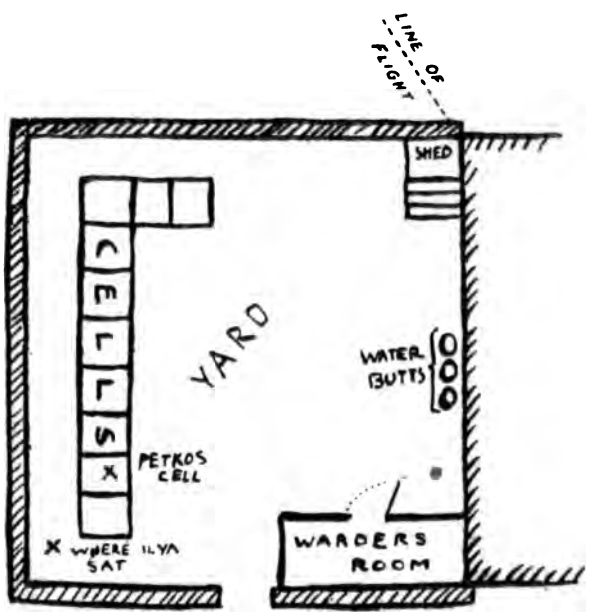
Petko turned over with another groan.

"I can't go, brothers," he said, "it's impossible."

All night long he lay, his nerves tingling. He heard the recurrent tramp of the warder, whom they had been proposing to stun. At last, slowly to his seeking senses, came a certainty that another

presence was on the far side of the door, a presence which grew in his mind till it seemed a huge dark figure blotting out the night. By intent listening he at last caught the sound of a muffled cough, and a rustle as though somebody stirred on a chair.

Around the whole gaol was a high wall, and within this wall the cells were arranged so that a



corridor was left between the great wall and the cell walls, the doors of the cells opening on to the corridor, and the windows looking out over the yard.

Petko's suspicions were correct. Michaelo, hoping to receive some alleviation of his sentence,



had betrayed his companions, and the head gaoler, who hated Petko, glad of an opportunity to rid himself of a troublesome charge, refrained expressly from any examination of fetters or door, but when the night came, brought a chair which he set in the corridor, put a cushion beneath his feet and so all night long sat with his rifle across his knees waiting for the moment when Petko should appear. Then he would kill him. All night long he waited. By a glance the whole of his scheme had been ruined.

The next morning was a Prazhick, a feast day. Thousands of peasants were pouring into the town, a great market was being set up. In the prison they could hear the cries of the peasantry and the tinkling of the carriage bells. Petko lounging out into the yard met the gaoler face to face.

"Dobra Utro, Ilya," he said, staring into the gaoler's eyes and grinning. "You don't look as if you had slept well."

Ilya glowered at him, but hurried past without an answer. There was a faint drizzle, the yard shone white beneath the sky.

"All prisoners into the wardroom," cried the gaoler. "I'll take orders for the market there"; for it was his custom to traffic between the prisoners and the outside world, taking with him one to carry his parcels. As Cristich passed, Petko seized him by the arm.

"Stay outside," he whispered, "I've got an idea," and he slid behind the wardroom door. The

door opened into the court, and once the prisoners and guard were within Petko pushed so that the door fell slowly to, as though blown by the draught. Outside there was a loop and a ring. Quickly he slipped the hook over its loop. The warders were imprisoned.

"Quick," he cried to Cristich, "those water barrels." Against the wall were three large wooden tubs in which the prisoners' drinking water was carried from the well and stored. They rolled these tubs to the far side and placed them on the steps of a small shed which filled the corner. The door, wrenched from the shed, they laid across the barrels. Petko ripped his weakened shackles apart and holding the loose end of the chain sprang on to the door, while Cristich broke his fetters. A hand's help, and Cristich followed. The gaoler in the wardroom had now discovered that the door had jammed, and was crying for help. Petko sprang to the roof of the shed, and thence to the top of the wall, pulling Cristich after him. Together they jumped from the wall, as the gaoler bursting open the wardroom door, ran out into the yard. Ilya stood for a moment, then, crying a malediction, ran back for his gun. The wall was four metres high; the fugitives fell into the ditch unharmed.

"Quickly," cried Petko, dragging his feet from the soft mud into which they had sunk almost to the knees. Cristich followed.



Before them stretched a field, about a kilometre across. Holding up the loose end of the fetter chains, they ran, striking out in the direction of the river. The gaolers, debouching from the gate, came panting round the corner of the gaol wall.

"Petko," cried the head gaoler, "give up. I have you covered."

Petko glanced hurriedly over his shoulder. He could see the muzzle of the gaoler's gun, and how it was describing small circles in the air.

"Good," he thought, as he ran on, "he's too excited to shoot straight."

The gaoler fired, a bullet hissed over them. The other warders, taking the signal, fired a volley, but their hands were unsteady, because of the exertion of bursting open the wardroom. The bullets went wide. In the middle of the field was a cattle shed. Cristich pointed.

"If we can reach that," he gasped.

Another volley swooped by them, one bullet, a ricochet, humming like an angry bee. They reached the cattle shed, for a while it gave them shelter. The gaolers, in order to shoot, had to run across, which lost them ground in the pursuit. Petko was one of the fleetest runners in the north, and with his hand in Cristich's armpit, urged him on. They were across the field, and had dropped in a ditch on the farther side of the low wall. Now they could see the trenches and embankments

which divert the Morava floods from inundating the town. For a moment they hesitated.

"We can't go up there," said Petko, pointing. "The peasants are all coming into town along the road. They would cut us off. We'll have to cross the river."

Cristich stared at the flood, it was a quarter of a mile broad.

"I can't swim, Petko," he said.

"We'll get over somehow," said Petko. "I'd rather drown than be retaken. It's not very deep."

They ran on through bushes, through shelving sandbanks till they came to the river bed. Cristich's breath was coming in gasps, he had been some while in prison. A little way up was a peasant cutting up a driftwood log. Petko stopped before him.

"Brother," he cried, "we're politicals—escaped from the gaol. Tell the gaolers that we're gone south," he pointed wildly.

"All right, brother," said the woodcutter, "but which way are you going?"

Petko pointed across the stream; already Cristich had made the first steps into the water.

The woodcutter looked down at the heavy iron chain.

"You'll drown," he cried.

"Well, goodbye, brother, then," cried Petko, racing after his companion. "Better drown than lose liberty."



They surged through the river. The current, swollen by the recent rains, boiled muddy green about them. For a while it was fairly shallow. The irons, instead of impeding, kept their feet firm on the bottom, or they might have been washed away. The water deepened to their shoulders, to their chins.

"Hang round my neck, brother," urged Petko. "The deep part is not very broad. Keep your mouth shut, gasp when we come to the surface."

The water came up to their mouths, Cristich, the shorter, could now only breathe through his nose. Petko pulled his companion's arm tighter.

"Jump," he gasped.

They sprang forward. The green water closed about their heads, as soon as their feet, weighed with the irons, touched the bottom, they sprang again. In the instant their heads came above the flood, they gasped a chest full of air. Again they sank, again they sprang. In leaping bounds they crossed the deepest part, till they came right to the opposite bank, where they could grasp the hanging boughs of some willow bushes.

As they hung, panting, expelling from their lungs the water which had found its way in, they could see the gaolers debouching on to the river bank, staring wildly up and down for signs of the fugitives. Spying the woodcutter, the gaoler ran towards him. Petko and Cristich could see the agitated pantomime. The questions of the

pursuers; the pointing peasant. But the police did not seem satisfied. Half a mile away, a long wooden bridge crossed the river, over the bridge a solid stream of peasantry was pouring, donkeys, ox-carts, men in white clothes and embroidered leather waistcoats, women with gaudy handkerchiefs, and many-coloured skirts and stockings, carrying gay bundles and knapsacks, to the fair. No fugitive could have passed that stream without causing in it a violent excitement. It pursued its road, however, intent and unagitated. There was good reason for the policeman's doubt.

From under the bushes the two fugitives could spy a violent altercation. A policeman stripped off his belt; the woodcutter's cries of pain floated across the river, but the peasant persisted. Soon the police spread, some going this way, some going that.

Petko and Cristich crept out, through the tangled screen of willows and lay flat on the bank.

"Well, we've got a start of them," said Petko. "They aren't certain which way we've gone, and that crowd on the bridge will delay them longer. But we can't loiter."

"No," agreed Cristich. "This side of Ovchar we shan't get any safety, and they'll rouse the country on us."

Having wrapped the chains about their legs, they set out, pushing along the muddy tracks of the foothills for about ten kilometres.

"There's Kablar," said Petko, pointing at the

mountain above. "This is where we must cross the river somehow."

The river now was narrow and swift, there was a little flat land at the foot of the hills, though in some places they ran straight down to the water's edge. Suddenly Cristich cried—

"There's a boat."

A long canoe made from a single tree trunk, hollowed out and roughly shaped, lay in a little backwater. They ran down to her, but she was padlocked to a post driven deep in the bank.

"We could break that chain," said Petko, "but there are no paddles or poles."

A countryman came sauntering. He was a thin, grizzled man, his clothes were all new, his coloured waistcoat resplendent, and his embroidered socks glowing. He seemed dressed for a feast. He stared for a moment at the two who stood before him in their still sodden clothes.

"You've been having a bath, brothers," he said. Then his eyes rested on the chains bound about their legs. His expression altered, his mouth fell. "For God's sake," he cried pointing.

"Yes," said Petko, "we've escaped from the gaol at Chachak—politicals, brother; we must cross to Ovchar for shelter. Can't you lend us the paddles of the boat?"

He advanced towards the man, his hands open. The man waved him back, retreating as Petko advanced.

"For God's sake, brother, go away. It's my Slava to-day, the feast day of my house up there. They're all drinking and singing. If they find out I've seen you, the gendarmes will fling me into gaol. For God's sake go, brothers."

Petko made a movement of anger. The man fell on his knees.

"For the love of Christ, brothers, go quickly; I won't tell."

"Come on, Petko," said Cristich, "we can't do anything with him."

High up on the steps of Kablar they halted.

"Let's get rid of these irons," cried Cristich.

In his pocket he had a stone chisel, smuggled to him in gaol by a friend. Of one stone they made an anvil and of another a hammer. Only one ring, that about Petko's left ankle, remained, when a girl appeared. They sprang up.

She was a tall good-looking girl, dressed in all her finery, a brilliantly coloured handkerchief about her head.

"All right, brothers, don't be alarmed," she said. "The police are down there, they are scouring the countryside. Each policeman is taking ten farmers and they are forming chains. They think you are somewhere about here."

"Well, we can run anyhow," said Petko, dancing with the new lightness of his feet.

"That will be no good," said the girl, "there are too many. They will shoot. Go over there,

brothers. In the gullies between Kablar and Prievor are many caves and hollows. This is the best place."

She nodded, smiled at Petko and disappeared downhill. Petko stared after her, she was a pretty girl.



"We must be moving, brother," said Cristich shivering.

"Hullo," cried Petko, "it's going to snow. Curse it, we will leave tracks. Come on."

They scrambled over the mounds and loose sands of the hillside. There was no undergrowth beneath the trees.

"If only we were in Ovchar," cried Cristich, "but here there's nowhere to hide."

They ran on. As they were crossing a little valley, wading laboriously through the deeply accumulated leaves of the previous autumn, Petko stopped. The snow was falling thicker than ever.

"Cristich," he cried, "we'll hide here."

"Where?" asked Cristich astonished.

"Here," said Petko, pointing downwards, "burrow into the leaves, they're deep enough. Smooth them over. The snow will cover it all. We can climb out at night."

Hastily they dug two pits in the deep bed of rotting foliage. They scrambled in, and then cautiously filled up the holes as well as they were able and made it all seem smooth above. The snow fell fast almost blotting out the landscape.

"Good old snow," cried Petko, as he ducked his head into the hole. "As long as they don't tread on us, Cristich."

They lay quiet while above them the snow smoothed everything in a uniform covering of white. The police and peasants sweeping back and forth over the mountains saw nothing suspicious in this quiet valley. The fugitives buried in the leaves heard their calls and cries, heard even the swish of a pair of feet ploughing through the material of their covert. Soon the cries died away and the lonely silence was broken only by the breathing of the two men and their groans as cramp, induced by the chill damp of their hiding-place, gripped them. At last Cristich said—

"Petko, I can hold out no longer."

"A little quarter of an hour," urged Petko.

The minutes went by like centuries, but Cristich could not bear the pain, and flung himself from his hole.

"It's all right, Petko," he said, "it's dusk."

"It should have been black night," answered Petko, "but we'll risk it."

They scrambled out into the darkening frost. Now that their ears were cleaned of the leaves, they could hear the faint calls of the search parties, sounding from the hills above.

"Well, we can't get back now," said Cristich, staring at the dark holes in the snow. "We must go on, Petko."

They crept across the hillside, taking advantage of the ravines and watercourses. Suddenly Petko stopped.

"What's that?" he whispered.

There had been a faint crack as though a match had snapped.

"Bear," whispered Cristich.

On the bank above them a man's figure appeared. He was silhouetted against the dark blue of the sky. Standing erect he stared down into the gully in which the two fugitives were plainly visible, their faces white blotches in the dusk. The two saw him make a motion with his hands, as though counselling them to crouch. He turned.

"Nothing there," he shouted; "come on, men," and strode off.

They could hear the file moving in a large semi-circle.

"Marko Soldatovitch," whispered Cristich, "what infernal luck!" They lay hid till at last three shots from the river-bank gave the signal that the search parties should return; in the dark nothing more could be done.

"We must get that boat," said Petko. "Perhaps the girl——"

"And food," added Cristich. "I'm hungry."

They felt their way with caution down the mountain side. Presently they could see the glim and flicker of a fire in the blackness. Creeping on, they came to a wattle fence, peering over which they could see the small red-tiled one-storied farmhouse, whose lighted windows promised a warmth and comfort of which their chilled bodies dared not partake. In the far corner of the yard was a wattle shed, glowing firelight danced in the door, shadows of women came and went between the shed and the farmhouse.

"Wait here, I'll explore," whispered Petko.

He stole across the yard. From a corner he peered through the interstices of the wattle walls. Three women were in the shed. There were dishes and stewpans and a brass coffee pot on the fire. The faces of the women leapt out and disappeared as the flames danced. The third woman was she

whom Petko sought. He waited until she had carried some steaming mess to the house. Through the open door came sounds of revelry. He stole out into the yard, intercepted her as she came back through the darkness, and laid a hand on her arm. She started but did not cry out.

"Hist," whispered Petko, "I am one of the escaped prisoners."

"What do you want?" returned the girl in a low voice.

"Food," said Petko, "we're starving."

The girl drew him farther into the gloom.

"Later," she said, "but I can't give you meat. It's Lent."

"Anything," said Petko, "we're starving."

"Where are you?" asked she.

"Over there, just outside the fence."

"I'll bring you something," she said; "wait for me there."

Presently she came, stepping daintily through the mud. She brought bread, and Kaimak, and potatoes and a jug of raw red wine. They ate voraciously.

"One more thing," asked Petko, "the boat. Can you get the paddles? We'll pay you."

"I don't want to be paid," breathed the girl, "only wait till the Slava is over."

"Maria," called a voice, "Maria."

"I must go," said the girl, and fled, a pale ghost.

When the sounds of revelry had quite died down, when the last guest had departed, carrying on her shoulders a pair of rough paddles, the girl came back. Silently she led them by a twisting muddy track down to the river. She unmoored the boat, and taking Cristich ferried him across. Presently Petko heard the dip and splash of her return. She dragged herself to the bank by the bushes. Petko stepped into the narrow craft; in the swift current it rocked unsteadily. They grounded on the opposite bank where there was a flat shore. Petko stepped out into the water.

. He held out a hand, seeing the girl a shadow against the flicker of the river.

"God bless you, sister," he said, "when I have got money I will come and recompense you for your kindness."

"I don't want your money," said the girl, leaning toward him.

"Well, good-bye, and thank you." The man bent.

The girl put an arm about his neck and kissed him on the lips.

"God bless you, brother," she murmured. "Good journey."

Petko stood till the rattle of the chain told that she had safely recrossed the river, then he turned his face to the hills.



CHAPTER III

THE HONESTY OF CRISTICH

In a little clearing, amongst the trees and thick undergrowth on the slopes of Ovchar, a fire, left by some herd or mule driver, had slowly dimmed to glowing ash. While the dying sun had stained the tree-tops a golden brown, the fire had cast on the trunks an equal illumination, but fire and day shrinking together, now had left only a small red spot over which hung a deep disk of night's own blue, like a high canopy, all else was darkness and mystery. Into the stillness came the sounds of cracking sticks and the notes of two voices. One cried—

"See, there's a fire."

The other answered—

"Good, we can dry ourselves; I am infernally wet."

Dark hands appeared over the glow, laying bits of wood on the charcoal. A face with puckered lips began to blow, and—as the embers sprang orange beneath the rushing oxygen—glowed a vermilion gargoyle with swollen cheeks and starting eyes. Soon the new wood crackled, the

flames leaping to the withered leaves and the sparks whirling into the air, a fountain of fairyland. The trees, divided by the night, were the columns of some fantastic pavilion, ceilinged with powdered stars.

But Petko Moritch and Cristich had no eyes for fancies. They were taking off their wet garments and soon crouched naked in the heat; while hanging from props their soaked vesture was gently steaming. On Ovchar they were, for the time being, in safety, the undergrowth being so thick that the police could not attempt a thorough search.

"I never thought that we could get away," said Cristich.

"It's my luck," answered Petko. "I always was lucky."

"You weren't lucky to get into gaol," retorted Cristich.

"I was foolish," admitted the other.

While the clothes were drying, he searched from his pocket a soaked box of tobacco and some dripping papers, which he spread near the embers. In a short while he could make a cigarette, which he puffed with shut-eyed satisfaction.

"Do you know the road to Marko's?" he asked.

"In the daytime, yes, but it is so cursed dark."

Petko turned so that his bare back could share the heat. They sat in silence. When the clothes



were dry, with grunts of satisfaction, the two dressed themselves and kicking apart the burning sticks, started once more up the hill.

"We must climb to the top and thence we will find a path," Cristich said.

The climb of some sixteen hundred feet in the pitch dark was unpleasant, and difficult it was to find the way through the thick scrub, though the process was simplified, for they were on a hillside and the top was the objective; at the summit they sat down to rest. Cristich examined the positions of the stars and tried to locate the gleam of the river far below.

"The path should be over there," he said at last.

"I wish that I had a match," answered Petko, "my cigarette is out."

The hill turned downwards at once, they moved forward with caution. Leaving the bush they came on to stones of all sizes, so loosely compacted that their feet sank in to the ankles.

"I don't think that this is the way," said Petko, hesitating.

"We must go on now," answered Cristich, taking another step forwards. He uttered a cry of horror, for beneath their feet the hill began to slip; in the darkness it was as if the whole mountain were turning over. Unable to retain their balance they fell prone while the hillside moved faster and faster, rocks leaping and thundering by them. As

they lay waiting for death or disablement the avalanche slowed and came to rest.

"Thanks to God," cried Cristich, "that one of the rocks did not hit us."

"Are there any precipices here?" asked Petko.

"I don't know," answered Cristich.

"As soon as we move this stuff will slide again. We must jump as far as we can before it rushes."

"I suppose there is no other way."

Stumbling and staggering they sprang across the stones some thirty yards before the momentum of the falling hill brought them again to the ground. The horror of the position was magnified a hundredfold by the darkness.

"We'll get across all right," cried Petko, when the hill once more had halted.

"If one of those rocks does not squash us, or if we don't go over a precipice," agreed Cristich.

"Listen," said Petko.

They were silent, but no sound came but the faint murmur of the river in the valley.

"If there were a precipice we should hear the falling stones," said Petko.

Descending some thousand feet they had crossed the shoot, bruised, but neither badly injured.

"Thank God that is over," cried Petko, scooping the small stones from his sandal with a long finger. "Now where are we?"

"Let us get away from the river," answered Cristich.

They passed again into woods, in the early morning approaching a small village of wooden houses, which with high-peaked roofs seemed to be—rather than an erection of the nineteenth century—a memento of some etching by Albrecht Dürer.

"What place is this?" asked Petko.



"I do not know," confessed Cristich.

"Are we to risk it?"

"If we choose a poor house, don't you think?"

At a small wooden shanty on the far edge of the village they knocked. A thin man opened the door.

"Brother," said Petko, "can you give us shelter to-day?"

"Who are you?" asked the man.

Petko pointed at the fetter ring which still was about his ankle.

"We are politicals. I will not deceive you. We have escaped from Chachak gaol. If you will shelter us you will be liberally rewarded."

The man rubbed his towsled head.

"I must ask my wife. The farm belongs to her."

He went to an inner room and, returning, dragged them into the house and slammed the door.

"We are hungry," said Petko. "Can you give to eat?"

"Bread and cheese only," answered the woman who came at that instant from the bedroom. "It's Lent. We are going to the Monastery, and if we cooked anything they would smell it. We would get into trouble."

Soon the peasants set out, locking the fugitives in the house. Petko and Cristich lay down on the bed and slept, a long, delicious sleep. In the evening the pair returned, made a feast of cooked bacon and ham with other good things and red raw wine, and after dark had fallen the farmer led them on their way, having first struck the fetter from Petko's ankle.

Marko Boshkovitch was a farmer of good standing in his district and related to Cristich by marriage. He welcomed the fugitives with great

joy over the baffling of the "Naprednjak" plots. He gave them his own pistols, and, having only one dagger, made a second, grinding down an old Turkish sword of excellent temper. He then took the two to a safe hiding-place in the hills where for a few days Petko and Cristich rested, eating, sleeping, and smoking. Tiring of the inactivity Petko said—

"Cristich, we must get out of the country."

"We can go to Austria."

"But we must have money."

Cristich agreed.

"There is a horrible man in Uzhitze," went on Petko. "Often and often I have thought what a joke it would be to rob Alexia Militch. Now I am going to do it."

Cristich sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"They have branded me as a criminal," he said.

"You will come with me?" asked Petko.

"Yes, I will come," answered Cristich.

They set out that very evening on the long walk to Uzhitze. There was a fair road, easy to find in the dark. Petko was very happy, the approach of adventure having roused his gaiety. Cristich, however, was silent, almost morose.

"You are not very cheerful, brother," said Petko at last.

Cristich halted. "Petko, my friend," he said, and his voice sounded very earnest, "I have been

thinking as I came along, I have been an honest man all my life. Even if the "Naprednjak" have called me a thief that does not make me one. I can only become it by my own act. My mind is too used to its routine, Petko, to let me turn robber. Forgive me."

"You won't come with me?" asked Petko.

"I cannot."

"S'bogom, then," answered Petko carelessly. He held out his hand and Cristich gripped it.

"You understand," he cried.

"Oh, we are made in different moulds, that is all. Good-bye."

Petko continued his route alone. Arriving at Uzhitze he hid in the bushes until dusk had fallen, when he crept out and stole into the town. The inn was a largish square bar-room, the bedrooms in an annexe, projecting from the back and filling one side of the yard. Petko choosing the moment when the staff were at supper slipped into the innkeeper's room and hid beneath the bed. He lay for a long while as the night dragged along, being at one moment the unsuspected audience at a sharp quarrel between the host and his wife, but at length the hotel was shut and the victim prepared for bed. Petko could follow, by ear, all his movements as he undressed: he heard the clink of the keys slipped beneath the pillow. The mattress sagged above him, as the man flung himself on the bed. When loud snores guaranteed sleep Petko crawled from

his hiding-place. In the big bar-room he found the safe and unlocking it with the stolen key, a small pile of gold rewarded him. Slipping the keys into the safe he shut the lid; it had a spring lock.

He returned to Marko's tranquilly; Cristich had gone to the house of one Novitza Topalovitch, a peasant suspected of dealings with the banditti of the district.

"I must find him," said Petko.

"You can't miss the way," answered Marko, "that path will bring you to a village. Three kilometres beyond you will see a decorated house, with horsemen painted on it."

Petko Moritch set out at once, he wished to divide the loot with his comrade, for though the latter would take no part in the robbery, he felt sure that Cristich would not refuse to share the plunder. Honesty has its limits.

CHAPTER IV

TWO CRIMES

THE house was a small one-storied stone box covered by a red-tiled roof of low angle. On the white-washed front was painted a line of crudely drawn horsemen, dark brown and blue, and with legends above in cyrillic letters informing the curious that these were portraits of Serbian heroes, one was Marko Kralievitch, one was Milosh Obilitch, a third Czar Lazar, though to tell the truth there was little else than the legends to distinguish the one from the other. Around the house was an enclosure in which seven plum trees were growing. A woman opened the door from within, cast a dishful of slops into the yard, and a few shivering chickens ran forward to see if any edible had fallen with the slops. The woman turned to go into the house, but turned at the sound of a voice.

"Good-day, sister," it said, "is not this the house of Novitza Topalovitch?"

A stranger had come to the gate and was leaning over feeling for the latch.

"It is," said the woman without cordiality, in spite of the stranger's good looks and nice smile.

"Then Cristich is here?" said the young man.

"I don't know who you are talking about," answered the woman. "Who are you?"

"I am Petko Moritch," said the stranger.

The woman's expression altered, she smiled.

"That's different," she said. "Come in; Cristich has gone away to see his family, but Novitza is here."



Petko opened the gate and walked into the yard; as he bent to enter the house a man rose from beside the hearth and greeted him. The man was of medium stature, broad for his height, his bright eyes were set close to his nose and his head tapered to the sugar-loaf point, common in Slavonic countries.

"Good-day to you, brother," said the newcomer. "Where is Cristich?"

The housemaster motioned to a low stool by the fireside. Petko hitched the rifle from his shoulder; as he sat down one could spy the butt of a revolver in his belt near to the handle of a long two-edged knife with a Turkish hilt.

"Cristich has gone to see his family," said Novitza. "I hope he won't be caught."

"Any news?" asked Petko, rolling a cigarette.

"Twelve hundred dinars offered for each of you, if that is news," answered Novitza. "And I heard that the gaoler in Chachak is so mortified at your escape that he has gone to bed, and won't speak to a soul."

"He said that he'd take a woman's distaff and spindle and make himself a suit of underclothes if I got off: and I said that if I did not I would wash them," cried Petko, laughing.

Novitza glanced at him with squirrel eyes.

"And what do you propose to do now?" he asked.

"I don't quite know," answered Petko.

"You will need money to quit the country. Will your family provide it?"

Petko shook his head. "My family have no money to spare for me," he said.

"Well, listen then," said Novitza. "Down at the Sveti Troitza monastery there's a superintendent who is a great scoundrel, he robs the monastery and

he robs the peasants. Oh, I know him. He's got a lot of money stowed away in a strong box, not difficult to get at. I know the place like this. Now, will you help me?"

Petko pretended to consider.

"You must get away somehow," urged Novitza, "and for that you must have money. You can take it from a scoundrel, that is not robbing. If you don't get money you will soon be caught."

Petko did not tell that the proceeds of a robbery were already in his pockets, he acted a part. He slapped a fist into the other hand and cried—

"I'm with you, Novitza. They have forced me to this. Wasn't I leading an honest life when they arrested me and ironed me, too, on a false charge? Well, they can take the consequences."

"Good," answered Novitza. "When shall we do it?"

"To-night," answered Petko.

"But you are tired?"

"No, the sooner the better."

"It's a longish way, but I know the road blindfold. We will set out after dark."

They sat through the short afternoon drinking plum brandy and gossiping. Petko told of the escape from Chachak gaol.

"And you hid in the leaves, and the snow covered you," cried Novitza; then later: "Lord, I'd have laughed to see you rolling down Ovchar. How far did you fall?"

"About a thousand feet altogether," answered Petko. "Every time we started we slid once more, and tons of rock came down with us."

"You might have been killed," muttered Novitza.

When dusk had fallen they set out. Petko took only the revolver, the rifle would have impeded him. For a while Novitza led the way, zigzagging down slippery tracks towards the river. They came to a gulley; in the night it felt like a tunnel, the air did not seem free—and Novitza halted.

"My opanke strap has come undone," he said; "you go on, Petko."

But Petko waited.

"Why don't you go on?" asked Novitza.

"What is the good, I don't know the road. We'll get there no faster."

"I could catch you up," grumbled Novitza, fumbling at his leg. However, he took the lead into the gulley. Soon he halted once more.

"My belt is slipping, Petko."

"You seem all in pieces," said Petko gaily.

"Don't wait," said Novitza.

"You seem to want me to break my neck in the dark," answered Petko. "I don't know the road."

"You can't miss it," said Novitza.

"I can wait," returned the other.

They went on another mile. Novitza stopped with a muttered curse.

"What is it now?" asked Petko.

"I forgot, confound it."

"Forgot what?"

"The dogs."

"What dogs?"

"Why, the monastery dogs. How are we ever to get past them? They will rouse the country; no, it's too dangerous."

"Why did you not think of them before?" asked Petko.

"I know I am a fool. But we can't get past the dogs."

They turned home, Petko puzzled. How had an experienced man like Novitza forgotten such a simple fact as that the monastery had dogs? He blamed himself that he had been deceived by a fool; yet Novitza did not have that reputation, on the contrary, he was reputed to be a very astute man dealing with the heydukes and brigands of Zlatibor on their own level—yet he had forgotten about the dogs. Novitza trudged on ahead; they came to his house at two in the morning. Petko picked up his rifle and slipped the strap over his shoulder.

"You will sleep here," asked Novitza.

"No," answered Petko, "I am going back."

"To Marko Boshkovitch?"

Petko nodded.

"You sleep there?" asked Novitza; there was a curious gleam in his eye.

"I am not such a fool," answered Petko, turning to the door. He pressed three ducats into the woman's palm; she thanked him. Coming to Marko's in the dawn he rapped twice on the panes, and soon Marko in white loose underclothes was yawning before him.

"Come in, Petko," he said, stretching his arms. "The wife will get some coffee. How is Cristich?"

"He has gone to see his family."

"I hope he will not be caught, they might be looking for him there; how did you find Novitza?"

"He is a fool," answered Petko angrily, and told of the futile expedition.

Marko scratched the bare spot on his head. The woman brought small cups of sweetened thick coffee; he sipped one in an absent-minded way, he shook his head pulling his long moustache.

"I have never thought Novitza a fool," he said at last.

"Well, he was last night," answered Petko.

Marko shook his head again.

"I suppose you want to sleep," he said.

"Yes, but not here. I'm going into the bush."

"Much safer too," agreed Marko. "There's money offered for you. One never knows."

But once couched in the hiding-place Petko did not sleep at once, he pondered. The robbery at Uzhitze had not produced so much, and more money he must have. The offer of twelve hundred dinars would tempt many, and he must be prepared

to over-tempt, there were people to pay for help already given, and he must give something to Marko for the weapons. He had accepted quite naturally that robbery was the only means of procuring this money; society had pulled the edifice of his honesty about its ears, and he felt a pleasure in repaying their act—but whom should he rob? He reviewed the various towns of the district with their houses and townsmen, he conjured up to his mind inhabitant after inhabitant, and there recurred several times the form of the fat innkeeper of Poshega. This man was wealthy, and what added to the interest, many a brigand had tried to filch his gold without success. The problem was tricky and lucrative. Then, having settled the victim, he slept. When he awoke he went back to Marko's house for food. As he ate, his host talked.

"I saw Stanko Savitch this morning; he told me the story of your escape. It does not grow less in the telling, brother. Not one clue can they find from the moment you left the gaol, and they have swept the whole countryside. The police are furious. Zhivko is like a mad bull."

Petko poured out a glass of the raw plum spirit.

"If they don't find me they will hear of me," he answered. "I am going to rob Gavro Jovanovitch at Poshega; that will interest them."

"You are aiming high, my boy," answered

Marko with a wry smile. "Gavro boasts that every heyduk in the three districts has tried his door and failed."

"He won't be able to boast much longer then," answered Petko.

The inn at Poshega was a low square building with but two doors, the one opening on to the street under a veranda and the other into the walled yard where the carts could rest for the night-time. It was not a hotel, that is it had no bedrooms for travellers; the big bar-room was both for refreshment and repose, a low wooden divan stretching round two of the walls. In the wall of the room, immediately opposite the front door, was a short straight passage to the yard door; on one side of this passage was the kitchen, while the inn-keeper's bedroom filled the other corner of the house. On the evening of St. George's Day there were many travellers in the inn, for it lay on the cross roads between Chachak, Uzhitze and Valievo. The room was hot, and the combined smells of strong coffee, rakia and unwashed humanity made a cosy atmosphere. Travellers and peasants were lounging in negligent attitudes against the bar or couched on the wooden divan, some were noisy, one or two drunk. The host Gavro, a gross full-bodied man who always made one think of beetroot, was sprawled on a chair between the stove and the counter, behind which a thin-faced girl was grinding coffee in a Turkish

mill. As usual the talk turned on the exploits of the banditti.

"If I were a heyduk," cried Sava Pertovitch, who was drunk, "I would rob Gavro here. He's got enough gold locked up in that box of his, I'll bet."

"It takes a better man than you, Sava,"



retorted Gavro, without turning his head. "If Georgitch tried without success I'm not afraid of you, drunk or sober."

"Did Georgitch try?" asked one of the travellers, awed.

"Everyone has tried," grunted Gavro, "some two or three times. It's the back door, you see,

brothers, it looks easy, and then there's my bedroom quite handy. But it always diddles them."

He spread his great hands. "God, I am tired; bed-time, brothers."

The guests watched the bolting of the formidable door with admiration. The front door was then shut, and a heavy table pushed against it.

"No one could open that without waking you all," said Gavro, puffing with the exertion. One by one the peasants rolled up in their many-coloured hand-woven rugs and curled on the divan. Gavro turned the lamp till it was but a glimmer in the room, sounds of sleep arose almost at once. "Lakoo noche," he said; emptied the till and went to his room, there came the faint chinking of coins, then all was silent, save for the breathing and snores of the travellers.

Petko Moritch, loitering in a garden on the far side of the road, saw the lights sink low behind the dirty windows. He waited until sleep should have drugged all the guests to insensibility, then he dashed across the road and took shelter on the veranda. He had calculated that the front door was the weakest place and that no attack would be expected from that side, for the intruder would have to pass through a room full of sleepers to reach the landlord's door. Spying on a previous day he had noticed a small skylight for ventilation, and further that the door itself was made in two flaps, the upper part detachable for the hot days of

summertime. With one foot on the door handle he raised himself cautiously till he could reach an arm through the opening, found the catch of the flap and pushed it back, climbing through the opening on to the big table. The sleepers snored on. The intruder dropped to the floor and silent as a shadow disappeared into the passage. With the aid of a chisel and the dagger made from a Turkish sword he forced the door; in the silence the bursting lock sounded as loud as the report of a gun, though in reality no louder than the breaking of a stout stick; not a soul stirred. Petko hesitated till he was sure that no alarm had been given, then, placing the knife between his teeth in order to look fierce, he crept into the landlord's room. He felt his way along the bed, pushed a careful hand beneath the pillow, fumbled the tossed waistcoat and coat, but could not find the keys. He could hear the stentorious breathing of the man, and as he had felt beneath the pillow the hot breath had pulsated on his very cheek.

Lighting a careful match he looked around. A candle stood on a low table; he lit the wick, shutting the door so that the glow could not be seen by a restless sleeper. In the dim light the innkeeper lay, a mass of flushed fatness on the rumpled bed. Petko put out a hand and taking him gently by the throat shook him into wakefulness, ready to compress the windpipe should he cry out. The innkeeper opened his eyes. He sat

up, as he moved Petko's nail scratched the skin and a full drop of blood oozed from the congested veins and began to run down his neck.

"Who are you and where do you come from?" asked Gavro Jovanovitch. He spoke in a quiet almost conversational tone as though Petko were an expected visitor.

"Never mind, if you cry out I will kill you."

The innkeeper suddenly perceived the blood which had, in a thin stream, reached his chest. His eyes circled in terror and his mouth opened; Petko tightened his grip as a warning.

"It is nothing, a mere scratch. I am not going to hurt you if you keep quiet."

He took the grip from the man's throat and bringing out papers and tobacco he hastily rolled a cigarette.

"Smoke that," he urged. "It will soothe you."

Gavro looked at the cigarette for a moment, then, giving a grim little laugh, took and lit it at the candle flame.

"Well, then, what do you want?" he asked.

"Money is a nice thing, Gavro," asserted the robber.

"It is," assented the innkeeper.

"It is a pity that some have too much, while others have too little," said Petko.

"It makes trouble, certainly."

"I was arranging a readjustment. But your

keys were missing, so I ventured to awaken you to help me in the good work."

"There are sixteen men in there who would not agree with you at all," said Gavro, waving a fat hand.

"I know," answered Petko, "but your arguing days would be over, I fear. You might suddenly catch a sudden illness, fatal probably, which would begin by a violent shooting pain."

"True," agreed the other. He fumbled beneath the mattress and brought out a bunch of keys from which he selected one. In the small safe was gold, good golden coins which were heaped up in a polished red Russian bowl which itself glowed like gold in the candle light. On the shelf were notes of the new currency and silver, but Petko took only the gold, the notes might be traceable and the silver was not worth the weight.

As he was going he turned to the innkeeper.

"I have a friend out there. If you make any noise for half an hour he will kill you."

"Agreed," answered the innkeeper, lying back on the bed. "How are you going to get out?"

"By the way I got in."

"And that was?"

"By the front door, Gavro. I can recommend ventilators to your attention."

"I forgot the ventilator," confessed the innkeeper.

In the bar-room nobody had moved, the sleepers

lay on the broad wooden bench like tossed bundles of merchandise, only here and there a projecting foot indicated a human content; Petko climbed out as silently as he had entered, shutting the flap behind him so that the cold night air should not disturb the slumberers.

Once again on the road, he ran for a few miles with the slow elastic spring of the practised runner, then he dropped the pace to a walk. He arrived at Marko's in the first flush of dawn.

As they were breakfasting he pulled a pile of gold coin from his pocket. "If I give you a hundred and twenty ducats, Marko?"

Marko grinned.

"Now," said Petko, "for some sleep." He slouched off into the bush.

On the next morning he set out for a long walk. Some of the spoil was due to the couple who had sheltered Cristich and himself after the flight from gaol. He came to the poor hovel and knocking, entered. The couple were at their evening meal of bread and kaimack with a few onions added for zest. As Petko came in they rose up.

"With gold the slave is a free man, brother," he said; "I bring you some liberty." He slapped down a handful of money on the table, the coins sprang and rolled from beneath his fingers, the farmer bent suddenly to grasp those which dropped over the edge. The woman glared with wide-open eyes.

"Here is enough to buy fifteen sheep and a small ox," said Petko. "You must be very careful, or you will be suspected and put in prison. Don't bring out this money, but borrow some on the security of the farm. Pay that back gradually, then borrow more. . . ."

His second errand took him down the slopes of Ovchar; he crossed the river and came to the home of the girl. He was on the watch some time ere he was able to intercept her. When she saw him she paled, and then flushed a rosy red.

"I have come with what I promised you," said Petko.

"You promised nothing," answered the girl, looking at him, her eyes like stars. Petko opened his hand, it was full of gold pieces. The girl gave a gasp, never in her life had she seen so much wealth at one time.

"Take it," said Petko.

Maria shook her head.

"I don't want your money," she answered.

After much urging she took twelve ducats. "You know I don't want the money," she repeated, "but, brother, if you are killed I will spend this for candles on your grave."

With sinking heart she watched him disappear into the woods, then she went back to the farm holding the money tight in a clenched hand.

Petko's thoughts were not unsentimental as he recrossed the river and started the climb of

Ovchar, but he put the mood resolutely from his mind. Women, he argued, were dangerous things, and the old Serbian superstition foretold calamity to any freebooter who should come under female influence, legends so often are concentrated experience. When night had fallen he made a fire, slept curled in the warmth, and next morning awaking with the animals, continued his route.

Marko greeted him with a gloomy face.

"What is the matter?" asked Petko. Marko drew him into the house.

"You recall that foolish expedition with Novitza?" he asked.

Petko nodded.

"I thought it was strange. Novitza is no fool. Well. . . . he has killed Cristich."

"What?" cried Petko, bounding from his seat.

"As he was sleeping," went on Marko, "he shot him through the side. Now he will get the reward and at the same time he will get rid of the suspicions that he was associated with the bandits about here. Oh, he is a cunning one."

"I understand," reflected Petko slowly. "That night he was going to murder me."

"That is it," agreed Marko, "but he was afraid of you face to face, and when you refused to walk in front he thought that you suspected him."

"I had no idea . . . he could have killed me like a rabbit."

"I wish that Cristich had your luck," said Marko sadly.

"He asked me if I slept here," went on Petko, pursuing his train of thought. "I said no."

"Then you saved us both," said Marko. "He would have sold us like sheep."

CHAPTER V

TWENTY COPECKS

PETKO'S eyrie was on the side of a large rounded hill covered by tree and scrub. About the lower slopes a few winding goat and horse tracks zig-zagged to distant villages or farms, but little reason was there for farmer or traveller to aspire to the summits, whose lonely steeps were the haunt of bandit or of wild beast, the latter not very abundant and on the whole timid. There were leafy shelters left by woodcutters, however, and in one of these Petko Moritch was sitting in Turkish fashion crosslegged on the ground. Though the spring had come he had built a fire, the thin smoke of which drifted through the interstices of the hut. There was little danger, for he could overlook the only approaches and as for the smoke there were always trailing fragments of forlorn cloud, like the rags of ghostly garments, drifting to and fro through the bushes. Since his escape from gaol Petko had led a hard life, his companion Cristich dead, killed by the treachery which he felt everywhere. He had made up his mind to leave the country, but the proceeds of the inn robbery at Poshega had been

sadly depleted by the payments made to those who had helped him in his flight.

"Go where they least expect you," he said to himself, "and that means Chachak."

He slapped his knee, a memory had jumped upon him. He had recalled a little picture—a street corner, two trailing starved Montenegrin children driven from their home by the famine which was raging, two small gaunt hands outstretched in pitiful supplication, a brute with scowling face who stood in the corner shop, a blow, one of the kiddies on the ground with a piteous cry. . . . Petko remembered all this in a flash: he had seen the act of wanton cruelty too late to catch the arm, but not too late to threaten the man, . . . and to make an enemy.

"Jovan Seemitch," he cried. "Oh, wait for me, brother Jovan, and have lots of gold in the safe."

He timed his arrival for the night-time, for his face could not be shown in Chachak without instant arrest. The long street was deserted and dark. In front of his sister's house, he stood for a moment looking at the closed shutters. What would she think if she could but know? Opposite Jovan's shutters he waited reviewing his plan, but could find no flaw. The merchant's shop was strongly built, the shutters were of heavy pine and bolted from within, the door was well made, but his idea was a flanking movement. Under the same line of roofing and next door was a wretched

caravanserai selling rope and things of little worth, the strongest guard against thieves. The shutters of this shop were old and worm-eaten, the door a few hastily nailed planks. Petko soon had burst the rotten lock and was within. He closed the door, shutting himself into a stygian gloom, but he could go by memory. Feeling his way he found the wall which was lined with shelves. Using the shelves as a ladder he clambered up to the top, where by holding a strut and leaning back he could just grasp the edge of a trap-door in the middle of the ceiling, he took a firm hold with one hand, settling his fingers into the cracks of the old timber. Then he let himself swing, and reaching up his other hand pulled himself into the loft, through which still guided by touch he went, clambered on to the roof beams till just beneath the tiles, and, as he expected, found an opening between the two houses. With a piece of rope stolen from the store he let himself down into the corner shop. With a dagger and chisel he burst open the safe, then he struck a match. There was a large pile of gold and another of silver, and remembering the nature of Jovan he took it all, filling his pockets with the weighty coins. Jovan would be surprised on the morrow, he had often boasted of his shutters and of his door. . . .

In his bushy refuge Petko counted the coins, which amounted to over a thousand dinars, quite enough to take him to America if he wished to go,

to the land whose very name was synonymous with plenty and freedom. Amongst the coins was an old Russian piece of twenty copecks, called a "zwanziger," long out of date, almost a curio, but current enough in the Balkans in those days when any round piece of metal stamped with an insignia



was good for barter. Unthinkingly he shovelled it into his pocket with the others.

His food and the news he still obtained by the good services of Marko Boshkovitch, and to the mountain farm he bent his steps. Marko greeted him with a smile.

"I have been expecting you," he said.

"What is it?" asked Petko.

Marko answered. "I have a message from your sister. The friends have been very busy on your behalf. It has now been proved that at the time of the miller's murder you were with the toll-keeper, so you could not be the criminal, though they would not have admitted this if influence—it's a good thing is influence. The police say, however, that if you come back, Cristich being dead, they will lock you up for the assault on Zhivko and then you will be all right. Your master says, too, that you can go back to your old work. That's all right then." He held out a glass of rakia. "Sdravie."

"You think that they are honest?" asked Petko.

"Oh, yes," answered Marko, "they can't lock you up for breaking prison when you are proved innocent, and they put you in irons remember."

"I hope they won't charge me with stealing the irons," laughed Petko.

"You can sleep here in safety now," went on Marko, "and to-morrow early you can go back to Chachak."

Civilization and somnolence go hand-in-hand. Petko was on foot soon after dawn, his progress in a manner a triumphant procession to himself, every stone, every tree on the roadside seeming to say, "You're a clever fellow." The hills appeared to smile, the very mud was kissing his sandals. "Ah,

if all Serbia were like you," he was thinking. . . . His entry into Chachak was also triumphant, the passers-by greeted him with a respectful "Good morning," the children stared in open-eyed awe. In his sister's house a meal was waiting; his old father, scarred from the Turkish war, had come from the small farm at Kosevatch and embraced him warmly; his sister, clad all in black—for her husband was but eighteen months dead and Serbian widows wear mourning for three years—had a greeting smile; the children were in breathless admiration of the uncle whose exploit had already taken a place with the memoirs of the heroes; young Ilya Soldatovitch, the boarder—who had once dreamed that Petko had dug a grave and had laid himself down therein—listened all ears, memorizing the story for his schoolfellows; relations of Cristich had come to shake the friend by the hand and to mourn again their loss. Petko, however, ended his account at the conclusion of the flight, the tale of his robberies he prudently kept secret, and after having sunned himself in the admiration of his family he went into the town. A crowd of enthusiastic friends greeted him and dragged him to the café which stands at the northern corner of the main square. Near the bar he sat while the youth of Chachak surrounded him with respect. He put a hand into his pocket and drawing out a handful of coins cried—

"Nikola, bring us rakia, rakia. To all who come, we must celebrate. Here's a toast. Here's

to Ilya the gaoler, long may we have so excellent a sieve to serve us."

A shout of laughter greeted the sally. The café was soon crowded. Petko spent his ill-gotten gains with liberality, none who came to drink with him went unrefreshed. The potent plum brandy soon excited the drinkers.

"Here's to the speaker Zhivko," cried Petko. "Does he still tell his untruths now that I have been away and could not look after him?"

"Zhivko has left the country," they cried. "You settled him."

"More money; more drink," cried Petko, slapping down another handful of coin on to the table. "Nikola, pour it round, rivers of it. To-day is a day of rejoicing. Soon, brothers, I must go back to the gaol to see how Ilya is getting on with his spinning, for he swore that if I got away he would take a distaff and spindle and set himself to woman's work."

The orgy became furious. Seizing a goosla—the Serbian one-stringed fiddle—Petko began to chant a song of the Brothers Soldatovitch, he sang of the death of Stanko and of the martyrdom of Jovan at the bandits' grave of Uzhitze. His fine voice stilled the clamour, the Serbs, ever susceptible to poetry, listened gravely to the verses. One or two of the drunkards began to weep. Two gendarmes came into the kaffana.

"Petko Moritch," cried one.

Petko continued to sing.

"Petko Moritch," shouted the gendarme above the tones of the singer, "you are arrested."

Petko finished the stanza and handed the goosla to a friend.

"Like the Soldatovitch, like the Soldatovitch," blubbered a tipsy peasant.

"Brothers," said Petko, "it is necessary that I go to see how gaoler Ilya is getting on with the spinning." Turning to the policemen he asked innocently, "Can you tell me if he has made much progress?"

And followed by all the occupants of the kaffana he took the road to the gaol.

The police clerk greeted him.

"You're back at last then," he growled.

"As you see," returned Petko.

The police clerk took a paper in his hand.

"This is your record, and good for a beginner, I must say," reading, "'Unwarranted assault on Zhivko Sajitch——'"

"Warranted," interrupted Petko.

"Mmmm — murder of the miller, Yev—— No, scratch that out—mummm—breaking of gaol twice—assisting the dangerous criminal Cristich also to escape. You are lucky, young man, you have influential friends."

"Thank you," said Petko.

"We have decided to be lenient," went on the clerk, "for breaking gaol you will not be charged."

"I should not have broken gaol if you had not put irons on me illegally," retorted Petko. "And let me remind you that if I had not had friends you would never have seen me again."

"Ah, young man," said the clerk half humorously, shaking a lean finger. "It is ill to be drunk with the pride of your own strength."

Petko was then locked up and left to contemplate the four walls and the iron stove of justice.

"I have a lot of sleep to make up," said he to himself as he rolled up in the rough hand-woven blanket.

But this tale is not properly one of the adventures of Petko, it is a tale of the wanderings of an old Russian coin, a twenty-copeck piece, almost a curio. It came unobtrusively from Petko's pocket and paid for the refreshment of one of his admirers. It slept all night in the till of Nikola the innkeeper. The following day it started again on its journey, being part payment of a pig, and went into the leather wallet of Georg the butcher, thence it travelled to the store of Radoikovitch, and with it his wife purchased a skein of cerise wool with which to finish a pair of socks for the priest against the next christening. She made her purchase in the shop of Jovan Seemitch; the assistant served her, and she had already traversed much of the street ere Jovan pulling open the till saw the very coin which had disappeared from his safe but two days before.

"Ha!" he cried, picking it up.

The customers turned.

"Who paid this?" cried Jovan.

Each denied any knowledge, but the assistant remembered.

"Oh, that was paid by Nadia, the wife of Radoikovitch. She bought some wool."

Jovan leapt from the shop. He was ill built for running, but he ran. His fellow-townsmen turned to watch, with grins, his panting passage.

"Nadia," he cried when he came up with her, "where did you get this?"

The woman stared at the coin.

"Why, Rako gave it to me."

From Radoikovitch Jovan followed the trace of the twenty-copeck piece to the till of Nikola, the innkeeper, in which the clue was lost.

"How can I tell who paid it?" said Nikola. "So many came in and out, taking a rakia or a coffee, and there was a lot of drinking that day. Petko Moritch came back."

"Petko?" cried Jovan; he hated Petko. If he were not guilty, the crime could at least be fixed on him, and that would be some consolation for the loss of the money.

"Yes," said Nikola, "he was spending money like water. Throwing it away . . . drunk; they were all drunk."

"Petko is the man," said Jovan.

"But how do you know?" asked Nikola.



"If any man had taken one drink and had paid for it with this coin, you would have noticed it."

"I suppose that is so," agreed Nikola, "but there is my wife."

"She would remember if it had been paid in separately." But the woman denied all knowledge.

Jovan glowered at Nikola, his tone grew menacing.

"You do not understand that you are in a nasty position, brother. The coin is traced to you, and either you are the robber, or you are not. If you are not, then who is? Petko."

"Well, he might, of course."

"You must swear that he paid it in."

"But I cannot say for certain."

"You must say for certain. There are only two, you or he. You can choose."

"Of course it is quite likely that he paid it in," admitted Nikola.

"And you will swear?"

"It must have been Petko. Who else could it have been?"

The little twenty-copeck piece made more bother than all Petko's exploits. If one is six foot two, handsome, loved by the maidens, a fine singer, and one of the best of athletes, there is always a crowd of envious souls ready to pull one from the popular esteem, should opportunity occur. But in this the hero-worshippers concurred and the twenty-copeck

piece swelled into ten robberies, three with murder: Petko had robbed the priest at Rudnik, he had murdered the merchant at Goocha, he had stolen two thousand ducats from the cattle dealer at Ivanitsa, he had broken into the mayor's house at Mladnovatch . . . Petko suffered from his friends as much as from his enemies.

He received his first warning from a sudden change of manner in Ilya the gaoler. Hitherto Ilya had avoided the company of his prisoner, to certain jeering references about spinning he had no answer; but one morning he met the adversary with a grin of malice.

"You had better escape again," he sneered.

"It is not worth the trouble," answered the young man. "If I did you would burst, and I do not wish to risk your life."

"You think you are a clever fellow, Petko, don't you? But you have done it this time."

Petko perceived that something new had occurred.

"You are such a beautiful talker, Ilya," he answered. "You should join Zhivko. You would make a fine pair."

"I am not a thief," retorted Ilya.

"Taking away men's liberty is not stealing, I suppose?"

"Liberty, ha, ha, liberty is worth to-day exactly twenty copecks, Petko Moritch."

Petko started, suddenly he remembered the

unlucky coin. Had he spent it? He covered his confusion with a laugh.

"Liberty is worth exactly what it costs to take it away; can you buy witnesses so cheap as that, Ilya. I am ashamed for Serbia."

"You know what I mean," retorted Ilya angrily. "Twenty copecks, twenty copecks, and don't you forget it, Petko."

He went away laughing.

"What does he mean?" asked one of the prisoners.

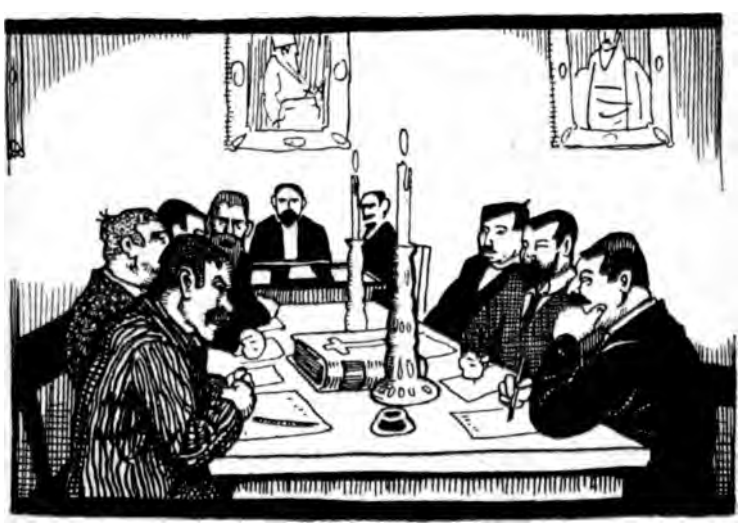
"I don't know, he's cracked, I think," answered Petko. But within his mind he was uneasy, the "twenty copecks" had been a foolish oversight.

Though some of the prisoners had been in gaol over eighteen months awaiting judgment the trial of Petko was not long delayed, for both gaolers and authorities were terrified that he might escape a third time.

Into the court-house, a large room lighted by windows on the eastern side, Petko was marched and set between two guards in a small enclosure facing the windows. To the prisoner's left hand was a long table where sat the four jurymen and the clerks to the court, and at the near end of which were the lawyers—a young man of promise hastily summoned from Belgrade acting for the defence—at the far end of the table was a smaller one, at which sat the three judges, the president of the court in the centre. On the large table were two

tall candlesticks—with lighted candles—on either side of a leather-bound Bible, the cover of which was decorated with a golden cross. The remaining floor space was covered with benches seating those favoured public who had been able to gain admission, the gangways were also crowded.

The witnesses followed one after the other,



admitted from an outer room as their evidence became necessary, and taking a seat on a reserved bench when they had been drained dry. The only witness of real interest was Nikola, the innkeeper, for the whole structure of the accusation rested upon whether Petko had paid in the twenty-copeck piece or no. He gave his statement gravely; the defending lawyer rose.



"You are an innkeeper?"

"Yes."

"You have stated in your evidence that this coin of twenty copecks was paid to you by Petko Moritch?"

"Yes?"

"How can you tell with such certainty? Did you see the prisoner pay the coin?"

Nikola hesitated, he saw the eye of Jovan glowering at him. He was about to answer when the lawyer interrupted—

"Do you know what perjury is?"

"Yes."

"Then be careful. Did you see the prisoner give in this coin? Now the truth, please."

"I did not, but no one else could have paid it."

"Petko Moritch was not the only drinker at your inn on that day?"

"No."

"If I am not mistaken there was something of an orgy on the night in question owing to the fortunate return of the prisoner who had been accused falsely of murder."

"That is so."

"Do innkeepers have to drink with their clients?"

"Yes."

"And the more the customers drink the more they press drink on to the host?"

"It is good for trade."

The other witnesses followed in dreary procession, and at last the counsel for the prosecution stood up to make his speech.

He did not elaborate the facts, merely pointing out that if Petko had not paid the coin the laws of evidence were of no value, and sat down. The counsel for the defence took his place. He began—

"The laws of evidence, short of an actual eye witness's statement, must always be accepted with caution, especially when there are alternative explanations which the prosecution makes no attempt to either review or disprove. It is not an inevitable necessity that because one citizen is murdered another citizen who has been seen somewhere in the vicinity of the murder must be the culprit: first, one must find out if there were motive; second, the character of the accused; and, third, that it was exceedingly unlikely that any other could have done the deed. In the case of our brother Petko not one of these prime points has been proved. For motive they have stated that he must have needed money; they have forgotten that he was a popular hero, falsely accused because he had the temerity to give a deserved beating to a pernicious speaker, and that almost every man in the county would have been not only ready but proud to have held out a helping hand or have given him money. We have proved to you that the prisoner bears an exceedingly good character; he is overseer for his master, is trusted



with large sums, and has never deceived a friend in his whole life. When in gaol before his escapes he warned the gaoler that he was about to make an attempt, and dared him to prevent it; this is not the action of a dishonest man, but that of one exceedingly honest. For the third point their case is little better, for even here they have yet to prove that Nikola's evidence is more worthy of credence than Petko's, though Nikola has, it is true, never been in gaol. But Nikola has not been accused of crimes which he did not commit. I do not wish to impugn the character of the innkeeper, but if evidence of any kind is trustworthy Nikola might be the criminal instead of Petko, and the latter appearing providentially has had Nikola's crime palmed off on to him. I do not myself believe that this is the explanation.

"You must imagine the feasting consequent on the happy return of the hero; many were undoubtedly drunk, and it is not less than probable that in the evening Nikola's powers of sight and remembrance had grown exceedingly hazy. The true criminal has taken advantage of this moment to get rid of the incriminating coin, well knowing that if the twenty-copeck piece is traced it will be ascribed to the man who now stands innocent and again falsely accused before you. It is even possible that one of his malicious enemies—witness the first false accusation—has seized an opportunity of inculpating him in a deed which is more difficult



to disprove than the absurd charge of murder which was first trumped up against him. I lay the well-known character of Petko Moritch against the nebulous evidence of the public prosecutor, feeling certain on which side the scales of justice will turn. That is all I have to say."

He sat down amongst subdued applause. The people looked towards the prisoner, smiling at him, some waved their hands. The peasantry and the prisoner were hustled from the room, while the lawyers followed with sedate steps. The court was about to deliberate.

After an interval the public were re-admitted, the prisoner was brought in, the lawyers resumed their seats.

"Petko Moritch," said the presiding judge with a firm voice, "you have been found guilty of housebreaking and of robbing in the shop of Jovan Seemitch. You are condemned to fifteen years in the penitentiary at Belgrade. Have you anything to say?"

"I am innocent," averred Petko solemnly.

His old father sprang up from the benches. "Fifteen years?" he cried.

"Fifteen years," answered the judge gravely.

"God pity you, Petko," cried the father, falling back into the arms of his daughter.

CHAPTER VI

IN BELGRADE GAOL

THREE days later Petko in the charge of a warder set out for Belgrade; he was neither ironed nor handcuffed, for he had given his parole. The warder, a decent fellow, sang merrily as the springless cart rattled through the green lanes of the "Shumadia," lurching over the uneven roads. The peasants were working in the fields and vineyards, the children were playing by the roadside, the villages were gay with flowers, and the pretty girls, who waved to the handsome stranger, wore bright blossoms pinned in their head-dresses of garish cotton, the cemeteries with their gay flags and painted obelisks seemed rather pleasure parks, now and again on the edge of the road stood large flat monuments, commemorating some soldier fallen in the Turkish or Bulgarian wars.

The carriage drew up at last at the little barn of Kraguevatch station. Petko was hustled across the railway lines into a small, stuffy, wooden-seated third-class carriage; after a long wait the noisy little train—the engine seemed much too small—clanked away from the town *en route* for Belgrade.

Petko was silent and sorrowful. He was not thinking of the fifteen years of dreary imprisonment which stretched before him, but of the death of his father, killed by the shock of his son's conviction; the cheery warder respecting his sorrow hummed to himself as he gazed through the dirty window at the slowly passing landscape. At Lapovo, a junction, waiting for the express, they sat in friendly converse at a table of the station restaurant over glasses of rakia.

Between the old Turkish "Calle Megdan" (Fortress Field), now a park and the citadel of Belgrade, is a road closed at each end by an iron gate and surmounted at the northern by a high tower which popular superstition states may be seen from the slopes of the Dormitor peak in Montenegro, some one hundred and twenty miles distant. This road is bordered by high walls each pierced in the centre by a gate of grille, and behind which lie the two sections of the gaol of Belgrade. God alone knows who built the first foundations, but for forty-five or fifty feet the walls are Roman, topped by another sixty of Turkish or Serbian addition. Outside the gaol walls, the terrain between the Calle Megdan and the Citadel is cut into a hundred or more small fields, each surrounded by the massive and ancient walls, and termed "deeps," in which the Serbian officers pasture their horses. Petko Moritch, marching from the Belgrade railway station, was received in

the main office of the prison. A clerk wrote out his description on a large sheet of paper as follows :—

Height : 6 foot 2.
Weight : 90 kilograms.
Complexion : medium.
Hair : dark brown, curly.
Eyes : dark brown, keen.
Mouth : straight.
Nose : firm, slightly aquiline.
Eyebrows : straight.

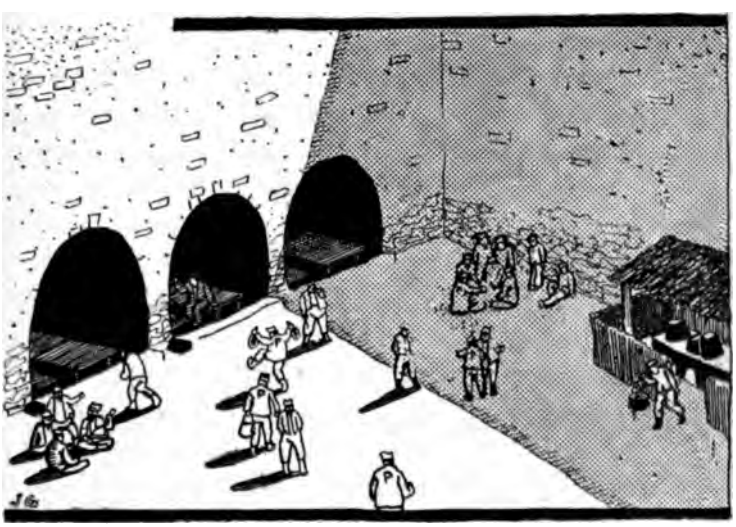
Remarks—Typical North Serbian type. Good looking, very strong.

The governor then read the sentence aloud—

"Fifteen years, Petko Moritch. If you behave yourself, break no rules, make no attempts to escape, and are otherwise a good prisoner it is quite possible that you will be released in six years or less. Do you understand? Good. Let us have no nonsense. Take him away. Fifteen-pound irons."

He was passed into a bare whitewashed room where his clothes were taken away, a suit of rough white woollen stuff being substituted. He pulled on the trousers; on each hip a large black R was imprinted, sign of the convict, the same letter repeated between the shoulders on the coat and on the side of the cap. Petko dressed slowly, the irons were then riveted to his ankles, and he

was led out into the gaol yard. Immense, the walls towered on every side, and higher yet the clock tower reared in steep distorted perspective. About the yard were groups of white-clad prisoners, some standing, others sitting, and the faint metallic clank of the chains was very insistent. In the base of the far wall were what appeared to be a



row of tunnels some twenty feet in diameter; the gaoler pointed.

"That will be your bedroom," he said, "the fourth from the end. Do you understand?"

"Where?" asked Petko.

"There, booby," snapped the gaoler, pointing to the fourth hole.

The tunnel was burrowed into the wall itself

and was some forty feet long; on each side ran a rough wooden divan six feet broad, leaving a gangway of ten feet between the benches. A group of men were lounging on the hard bench as Petko came to the mouth of the tunnel.

"Hello," said one, "who are you?"

"I am Petko Moritch."

"And you are coming in here?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's plenty of room, brother, and nothing to choose between the mattresses because there aren't any. What have you got?"

"Fifteen years."

"What for?"

"Robbery."

One or two of the other men turned their heads.

"Who did you rob?"

"No one," answered Petko. "It was a false accusation."

"False or true you've got your fifteen years all right."

As Petko moved the irons chinked at his feet, he lifted a leg trying to adjust the ring into a more comfortable position.

"They will keep you from jumping about," remarked one of the prisoners.

Petko felt that the time had come to make an impression.

"Oh, I don't think so," he said carelessly.

"You try," retorted another convict.

Petko moved his feet, the bench on which he was sitting seemed very springy, he tested it for a moment, ten feet away was the other bench.

"I bet you I will jump from this bed to that," he said boasting.

The convicts jeered.

Petko climbed on to the edge of the bed; gathering all his muscles for a supreme effort he sprang into the air, and landed on the edge of the opposite bench, his weight carried him forward.

"God," ejaculated one of the astonished convicts, "you are a jumper all right."

Life in the gaol was monotonous, and in the summertime unhealthy. All day long the convicts smoked, played cards and chased the shadows round the walls; if they possessed money they could purchase tobacco, wine, and a limited amount of spirits from the market. The long-service prisoners were not condemned to hard labour, though some, to relieve the endless tedium, worked in the government shops learning the trades of blacksmith, carpenter, tailor or of cobbler for the army. Petko Moritch, contemning the Government, refused to do its work, and lounged away his days with the others. Innocent men there were plenty in Belgrade gaol; political corruption was rife in the Serbia of those days, the "naprednjak" party headed by the king had organized a system of intrigue and of false

witness by which they removed any one who seemed to stand in their path. Some prisoners were there through jealousy, others by hate, many even were sworn in by members of their own families who wished to be rid of them or who coveted their possessions. Some of the cases were so notorious that even the prisoners talked about them: for instance, Danilo Yeremitch, who had incurred the enmity of the mayor of his district, falsely accused of robbing, had been sentenced to twenty years. While he was serving his sentence, the mayor by accident shot his own son. He accused Danilo of the crime, and though five warders went into the court and swore that Danilo was in prison at the time, the court lengthened his sentence to thirty years.

One day Petko was in conversation with a small fattish prisoner named Rako Petrovitch. Petrovitch was loudly cursing his lot.

"Eh," he cried, "if you have an enemy swear him into gaol quick, or by God he will swear you in. That's a fact, Petko."

"Who was your enemy?" asked Petko.

"A cursed innkeeper, a fat swine of an innkeeper at Poshega."

"Innkeeper?" asked Petko.

"Yes," said Rako, "Gavro Jovanovitch, may his fat body rot in hell. Have you heard tell——"

"You are here for robbing Gavro?" asked Petko.



"Yes."

"And he swore it was you?"

"Yes, curse him for a liar. I was innocent, I tell you, as innocent as a baby. He hated me. We had a quarrel over an ox and I won. My wife came into court and swore that I was lying at night by her side, but they did not believe. And I was innocent. Ten years, my God, ten years."

"I did that robbery," said Petko.

"You?"

"Yes, about St. George's Day."

Rako stared at the other.

"Then you can swear that I am innocent?"

"I can if you want me to," returned Petko, "but is it of any use?"

"But if I am proved innocent I can go."

"Do you think so?" asked Petko. "Haven't you been here long enough to see that it is not justice they want? Do you think they will confess that they were wrong? They will say that you have bribed me to take this, too, on me, and I will get a few more years but you will be no better off."

Rako rubbed his chin drearily.

"It is no use getting more for you if I don't go out," he said slowly. "Of course it's no use. But don't you think——"

"What about Danilo?" asked Petko.

"Curse Gavro Jovanovitch," cried Rako. "Why

did I not rob myself and swear that he had done it?"

So passed a year and a half of life, living like the bear at the bottom of some zoological pit, when there are no children to throw buns.

Eighteen months having passed with no opportunity of escape, Petko was transferred to the state farm of Lubichivo where the convicts were employed as labourers. Life was healthier, the prison was a large building surrounded by a high wattle fence, and Petko began immediately to form a plan of evasion. It was but a clumsy attempt. Just before the dusk, he and two others breaking the rusted shackles sprang over the fence and ran for liberty. They were seen at once and the pursuit followed close. The prisoners strained every nerve to reach the border of woodland, which, but a short distance away, promised them shelter, but the fetter chains flapping about their legs impeded them. They were beaten to the ground with blows from the rifle butts with which the warders flogged them without mercy. When consciousness had quite disappeared the gaolers dragged the limp remains of humanity back to the gaol and flung them into the black cells.

Petko Moritch awoke to a world of pain, of utter blackness. He tried to move and the agony in his battered flesh made him cry aloud. The door was opened.

"Stop that infernal noise," cried a voice.

"Where am I?" asked Petko.

"You are in the black cells, my boy, and serve you right."

During thirty days Petko was in the darkness, fed on bread and water. Thirty days of darkness which fingered with the touch of a devil, thirty days shut in with his worst enemy, himself. Half an hour each day was he allowed to walk in the blazing white courtyard, to keep him sane.

The twenty copecks were demanding a Shylock's interest. When his punishment was over he was sent back to Belgrade.

CHAPTER VII

THE ESCAPE FROM TOPCHIDA

In a long whitewashed room with windows opening on to the dreary vista of a prison yard, and barred so that even in sickness, even in death the prisoners should not forget that they had transgressed the moral code, Stoyan Michaelovitch lay dying. His was one of a long line of beds, each occupied by some prisoner stricken with scurvy, scrofula or phthisis and the hoarse coughing of the consumptive broke the silence, in which now and again someone more hopeful than his fellows would raise his voice in quavering song. Stoyan, lying listless on his bed, was like some emaciated æsthetic from a Byzantine fresco, his face was all scaffolding, the shape of nose cartilage and of maxilla were drawn sharply as though cutting through the skin; the cold light from the window emphasized the pitiful gauntness, throwing the eyes into shadow till they seemed great holes, drawing the cheekbone outline with an edge of ghastly green. Beneath the sheet his body made no sign of its presence, save when the chest, hollow cask of bone in which the timid life clung, reluctant to leave even the miseries of such an existence, laboured in spasmodic breathing.



Three years before, this Stoyan Michaelovitch had been a burly happy farmer, with land and children, sheep and goats and a wife; now sentenced to ten years' imprisonment because one night a rick on a neighbouring farm had caught fire, and his own brother had borne false witness against him; he lay on the edge of death from a disease which no doctor could diagnose, for there is no diagnosis for a broken heart.

A white uniformed assistant paused for a moment at the foot of the bed.

"Is there nothing I can do for you, Brother Stoyan?" he asked kindly.

Stoyan rolled his head on the pillow.

"I am dying, brother," he muttered hoarsely, "could I see Petko Moritch?" And presently Petko came, stepping delicately between the beds. He sat down by Stoyan and took one of his thin hands. Petko himself had changed, for four and a half years of prison leave a mark, and had bleached his face and loosened his limbs somewhat, though the eye was bright as ever it had been. For a while Stoyan's breath came gaspingly. At last he said—

"Petko, I am dying."

Petko pressed his thin hand, little use was there to try and deny.

"Petko," said the sick man again, "you know how it has been with me. How my brother falsely drove me into this, to get my farm. Three



years I have been here. You who are young cannot know what that has meant, a sapling may be transplanted, but an old tree, how shall it find new roots?" He hesitated; continuing, his voice weaker, "Petko, it is good that I am dying here. Often and often I have said, when I get away from this place, I will take an axe and I will kill, and kill, and kill, man, woman, or child"—the thin voice uttering their bloody threats gave to them a queer ghastliness—"man, woman, and child," he repeated. "I have seen here how man is evil, how all mankind is evil, and the best thing would be to kill them. I would have done it . . . yet, Petko, somehow I am glad that I am dying here—" he half turned in the bed—"I am . . . glad . . . I . . . did . . . not . . ." he sank back—exhausted, his voice was now but a whisper. "Petko, when . . . free, tell my wife . . . my children . . ." Petko nodded, his eyes full of tears. Stoyan lay silent. Suddenly with an accession of strength he dragged his hand from Petko's grip and flung out both arms towards the ceiling, half started up and cried in a loud voice—

"Oh, God, why have you given me such a life, for you know I am innocent?"

He fell back. Some of the other prisoners turned on their elbows. Stoyan had lapsed into unconsciousness. A hospital assistant came to Petko and whispered in his ear. Petko glanced at Stoyan, but the latter lay unnoticing.



"A couple of hours," said the male nurse—himself a prisoner.

"Poor Stoyan," said Petko; then bending down and laying his lips on the cold forehead, "Good-bye, brother, good journey," with swift steps he left the ward.

The assistant also left the ward for a moment, returning with a thin candle made of bees' wax; he crossed the hands of the dying man over his chest, and insinuated the candle between the stiffening fingers. Then he lit the wick.

Stoyan's glazing eyes fixed the little flame with an intense stare—after a while his chest heaved three times in convulsive movement, his eyes still fixed on the tiny light of the candle, but something had disappeared from behind them, his jaw fell slowly open. The assistant walking the ward gave one glance at the face, then stepping to the bedside he blew out the candle, and its dying smoke coiled up in the still air. Stoyan had gone to see why God had so mishandled him.

Petko came out of the hospital door and hurried across towards the gate. The doctor who had brought about his transference from Belgrade gaol to the prison sanatorium of Topchida was waiting for him.

"Look here, Petko," he said when the prisoner came up respectfully, "I want those papers copied out, and clearly, you understand."

Petko took the papers. He owed his position

to his small scholarship, for the doctor had demanded him as a secretary, his duties were light, and Serbian prisoners all enjoyed far more liberty than convicts in England. In fact, save for the loss of freedom, their lives were little inferior to those of conscripts in the army; they could drink, and smoke, and play cards or sing. The prison at Topchida was purely a hospital; some of the convicts were the sick, others engaged in the duties of guarding and caring for the sick. Everywhere in the high-walled yard could be seen the emaciated faces of the convalescents. As Petko crossed the court immediately facing him was the long, two-storied building where prisoners and sick were lodged, its grilled and regular-patterned windows hinting at the harsh soul-killing regularity of prison life; on his left hand was the big gate, and between it and the gaol a ramshackle building where the prisoners' clothes were washed. He passed by a knot of prisoners who were playing a Serbian equivalent to "chuck halfpenny," and halted.

"Hello, Petko," said one. "Aren't you well?"

"I'm all right," answered Petko.

"You're not looking well," said the other. "Is he, brothers?"

One or two agreed that he was not looking so well as usual.

"Stoyan is dying," said Petko. "Perhaps that's it. I've just been with him."



But he went away, thinking. Since his abortive attempt at the Government farm at Lubichivo he had made no effort to escape. He had learned a lesson; he had been beaten with the butt ends of rifles, and had then spent one month in the black cell, thirty long dragging days of blackness—thirty days, racked and wounded, with only cement for a mattress for the bruised flesh. One of his companions had died from the beating. He had given up ideas of escape . . . but this suggestion that he was not looking well. He had a horror of disease. He began to look about him for some means of evasion. Anything—black cell, back to Belgrade—rather than illness, for most of the sick went from Topchida feet first.

After a long thought he decided on a plan, and then sought about for a companion. He found two, Rako Yeritch and Sava Matitch, one of whom had ten, the other fifteen years to serve. Both had been condemned while under age, thus carrying no irons, and Petko's irons had been removed by a grace extended by Alexander to some of the prisoners after he had seized the throne from the Regents by his audacious *coup de main.*

In a small room on one side of the main passage they set to work one night; they had two knives and a bar stolen by Petko from beneath one of the beds. With these simple weapons they hoped to burrow through the wall and drop outside. Rako had cut through the plaster and was

scraping the mortar from between the bricks, and as soon as a brick was loose enough Petko levered it out. The room was small, the work laborious, and soon the air was filled with the dust of the mortar and lime. The first layer of bricks came easily enough, but the second layer were much more difficult. One could not get the lever at them, and those of the third layer were more difficult yet. The three toiled, sweating in the close confinement of the cabinet. At last Rako, who was resting, said—

"Look!"

The others turned their heads. As if suspended in the darkness were four small squares of deep blue.

"Dawn," said Rako. "How are you getting on?"

Petko dropped his bar. "It's no good," he admitted; "we can't get through."

The three stared at one another, or at where the others should have been, for all was invisible. There was a silence broken only by the faint panting of Sava.

"We'll catch it for this," said Rako.

"I was thinking," said Petko. "You know the laundry. There's an old smoke hole about seven feet from the ground. If we push one of those carrying poles into it—they are very strong—I could swing up, and once on the roof I could help you up too."



"But what then?" asked Sava. "What then?"

"Why drop and run," answered Petko.

"But the gaol gate isn't thirty metres away," objected Sava. "The warders would shoot us."

"It's between four and five o'clock now," said Petko. "After a long night watch they won't be very spry."

"It's dangerous."

"Well, we can't get any worse; we'll be beaten for this," said Petko. "I'm going."

"We will come," agreed the other two.

And together they strolled out into the prison yard, yawning and stretching their arms, imitating men new awoken from sleep. The yard was empty, the prison doors had just been opened, and the gaolers inside rousing the prisoners for the day. Petko moved swiftly to the deserted laundry, seizing a carrying pole he thrust it into the old pipe hole. He hung for a moment to test the strength, then with a quick heave swung himself up. Scrambling on to the laundry roof he leaned down and successively pulled Sava and Rako up after him, from thence to the top of the wall was not a difficult climb. For a moment they hung over the edge considering the situation. Thirty yards away to the left Petko could see the two armed gaolers at the main gate, just before him was a stream, deeply ditched and embanked with stone; the only means of crossing which was:

an iron bridge one hundred yards or so to the right. Facing the iron bridge was a soldiers' canteen, at the door of which a few early policemen were lounging. To reach the bridge it would be necessary to pass quite close to them. It was a case for speed.

"Ready?" he whispered to the others.

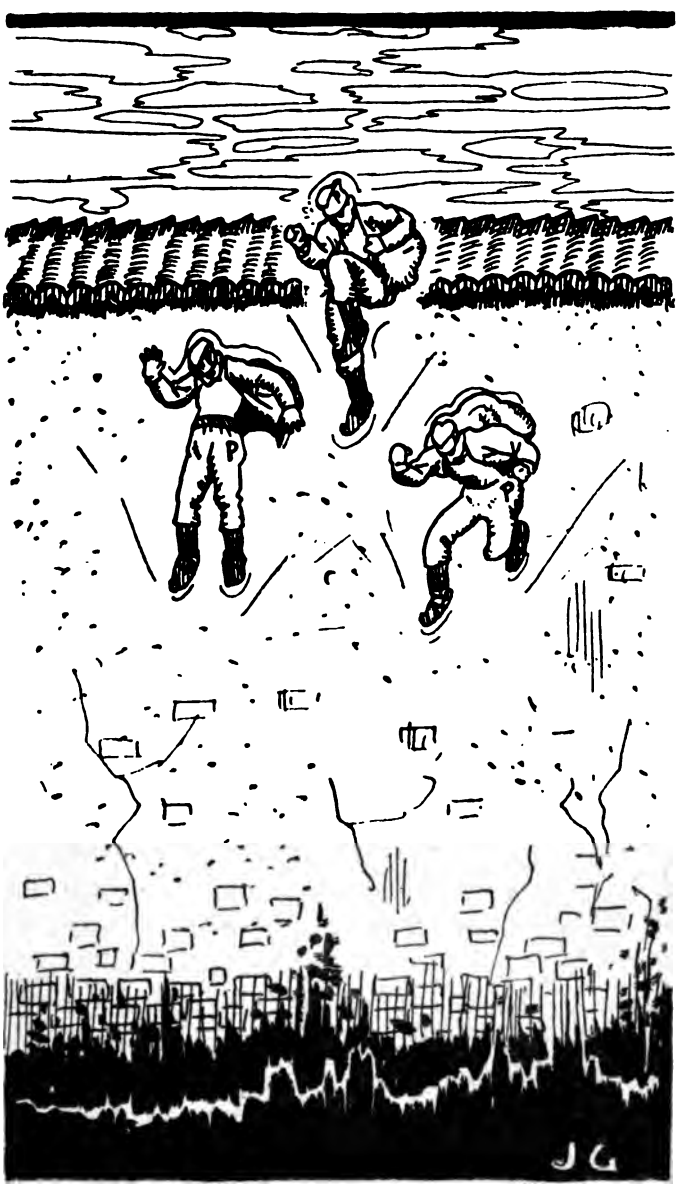
Then without hesitation he swung himself over the high wall, as he fell he prepared his body for the shock, dropping to his haunches when he touched earth and landing lightly on all fours, from which position he sprang at full speed for the bridge head. The two gaolers at the gate stared, immobilized by this sudden apparition of three men falling from the skies, and before either could level rifle the three had disappeared. The police at the canteen, too, were motionless with astonishment, though they only saw Petko who darted by them, crossed the bridge with the speed of a greyhound and disappeared into the park on the far side of the river. The guard fired two shots to arouse the prison and ran towards the canteen.

"Three men, three men," they gasped to the gendarmes.

"One, one, brothers," answered they, "and there he is."

Beyond the small park was a low rising hill and across the hill, a man in white clothes was running like a deer. The gaolers and soldiers levelled, but though they fired many times the




JG

white clad figure reached the top, and with a wave of the arms cleared the summit.

"But the other two," cried the gaolers perplexed.

"You must have been dreaming," said the gendarmes, "only one passed here."

The perplexed gaolers rubbed their foreheads.

"There were three," they muttered.

The other two had disappeared, as if by magic.

Petko Moritch ran on, till he was stopped by a high fence, of stout staves woven together with witheys. He scrambled over this, not without damage to his garments, and fell into the thick brushwood of a royal preserve. For a while he lay panting, for four years in prison is not the best training for an obstacle race. No bullets had touched him, though one he had heard whistling by with that strange note of hurry which marks a close. He waited for his companions, but they did not come, and when he was a little rested, he pushed on across the preserve, scrambling over the fence into a stretch of ploughed and fallow land. If prison had not weakened him, and if he had not been dressed in the tell-tale uniform of white he would have gone all day, but dawn was already breaking, the sky was clearing and a refuge was an imperative necessity. There seemed nowhere to hide, but between the ploughed fields were thin clumps of broom, and small fir trees; choosing the thickest Petko pulled down branches from the firs,



sticking them in the ground till he had formed a tunnel dense enough. He crept in and lay awaiting events. He watched the slow changing colours of the sky and the break up and dissipation of the clouds, while the minutes went by, each an hour's length. Never had time moved so slowly. But peasants came, crying to oxen, and began to plough the half finished furrows. Later were goats in the charge of childish herds. The goats wandered from shrub to shrub nibbling and kicking up their heels in frolic battle, the children gathering into a clump began some youthful games giving but scant attention to the animals.

Petko watched the goats with anxious eyes. An old nanny came slowly towards him. She took one nibble from the clump, and suddenly spying the lying human, stood for a moment while the two stared at each other, the goat regarding Petko with the eyes of a solemn devil. Petko said "Shh!" in a sibilant whisper. The goat stared unmoved. Petko slapped his hand on the earth.

The goat gave a curious bleat, and immediately all the other goats left their eating and came slowly towards Petko, gathering about him with the air of a council of deacons examining one fallen from grace. Petko "pished" and "tushed" as loud as he dared. The goats did not move. He thumped the ground. The goats gazed with unwinking curiosity, whilst sweat burst from the unfortunate victim's body. Then, as if at an agreed signal, the

goats made a right-about wheel and dispersed amongst the other shrubs. The little goatherds were still concentrated on their games. Petko lay panting, his heart throbbing as though he had raced a hundred yards at full speed. The warders appeared over the rough edge of the ploughed land. Petko heard their voices.

"Ohee, brothers."

The peasants halted.

"Have you seen a man, running?"

"Eh!"

"Have you seen a convict, running? Prisoners escaped."

"Oh, yes, he went over there," cried the peasants pointing to the south. They knew nothing of the matter, but the natural antagonism common to all peasantry for the police, was in them, and the south was the least likely path a fugitive would have taken.

"That way?"

"Yes—s. Running fast. You'll catch him though."

The gaolers disappeared in the direction indicated.

When they had gone the ploughmen laughed, slapping their legs. Petko lay all day in the shrub, some of the time he slept, the goats took no more notice of him, but avoided his hiding-place, thus preserving him from the inquisitive eyes of the children. With hollow stomach he watched the

ploughmen sit down to their midday meal, and in the dusk when ploughmen, children and goats had returned to their homes, he crawled, stiff-jointed from the brush. Before he continued his route he fell on his knees and lifting his hands towards the cold stars he thanked God for his deliverance.

Taking his direction from the pole star, Petko Moritch set off in a north-easterly direction, for near Chabatz lived a friend who in Belgrade gaol had promised him shelter if ever he evaded, during five long years much of Petko's conversation having been of attempts to escape. No food had passed his lips for twenty-four hours. He came to a road leading, as he thought, in the right direction and he set out along it. The squat farms were already dark, and bedded in their small orchards of plum trees were redolent of sleep. One house only threw a gleam of light across the road, and from it came the clangour of a blacksmith's hammer. Petko halted for some time on the edge of the light, hunger and prudence fighting in him, but hunger won, and putting the tell-tale white cap into his pocket he walked up to the doorway.

"Dobra Veche, brate," answered the blacksmith in return to his salutation.

"Brother," said Petko, "you see before you a man who is starving and penniless. Would you give some food to one who, though he cannot pay you now, will liberally reward you hereafter?"

The blacksmith looked at him. This man had not the air of a beggar.

"Yes, brother," he said, "if you are starving."

He laid down his hammer, and ran into an inner room, coming back with a loaf of bread, a piece of white cheese, and a strip of smoked bacon.

"Take it, brother," he cried, "for God's sake."

Petko buried his face in the loaf. When he had consumed a mouthful or two he said—

"I will bring you payment later."

"Do not bother about payment," returned the blacksmith. "God will reward me liberally, brother."

Petko took the road again with a glad heart. He had food enough for two days. As he went along in the dark he reflected, "Stoyan was wrong. If he had had his axe, and had met that man he would have killed him. . . ." When daylight came he entered a half-submerged forest. By jumping from stump to stump he penetrated deep into the wood, and climbing a tree settled himself in a fork. He slept all day and at night continued his route. He swung his arms and sang and danced with the joy of his liberty. When he should reach his friend, and had got a change of clothing and a weapon, he would take refuge in Bosnia. In the early morning he came to the farm. He had committed all the landmarks to memory and followed them without difficulty, and he recognized the house at once, for the window

frames were painted bright green, and there was a diamond pattern of violet, green, blue and yellow down each corner of the house. He rapped sharply



on the door. Soon it was opened by a man blinking with sleep.

"Petko!" cried the man astounded.

"Yes, Petko," answered the refugee.

"Come in quickly," cried the farmer dragging

him into the house and slamming the door. "I hope nobody saw you come."

"The road was as empty as my stomach," said Petko.

"Dara, Dara!" cried the man.

"In a moment," answered a woman's voice. She came from the bedroom. Her clothes were disordered, her hair dishevelled.

"We were still sleeping," she explained.

"Coffee, quickly," said the farmer. "He's starving. It's Petko. I've told you about Petko, in Belgrade gaol. We were together there. He's escaped."

"He'll want clothes too," said the woman scanning the white prison garments with distaste.

"My second best," said the man. He pushed Petko into the untidy bedroom and hunted out a suit of farmer's clothes from a box, short, rough, brown coat, tight trousers embroidered with black appliqué cord, a waistcoat, and a pair of elaborately worked stockings in coloured wool.

"You slip those on. Food will be ready, brother, as soon as you are."

Petko ate a voracious breakfast, telling between mouthfuls the story of his escape. Host and hostess listened gasping at the success of the daring scheme.

"And the other two, Rako and Sava?" asked the woman.

"I don't know," answered Petko. "It was

everybody for himself. They did not follow me, because I waited for them in the little wood. There were two shots, perhaps they were hit."

But neither Rako or Sava had been recaptured. They with Petko had dropped from the walls, and had raced after him. His speed was, however, much greater, and Rako, who was second, saw that there was no chance to reach the bridge before the police cut them off, so before they came in sight from the canteen Rako turned round the corner of the gaol, Sava following. For a moment they were invisible to the gaoler's eyes, and Rako plunged into a huge bed of nettles which lay against the back of the wooden canteen building. Sava crept in after him. The nettles closed over them. All day long they lay, hearing the search parties set out, hearing the files tramp past, shaking the ground beneath them, their hiding place never for a moment suspected. Two months later they were both taken near Dragachevo. They received the usual sentence of a flogging and thirty days in the black hole; but Sava never underwent the latter part, he was beaten so cruelly that he died in hospital from the effects.

When Petko had eaten his fill, a couch was made for him in the sitting-room, and he slept, and in the evening he and Yovan Polankovitch discussed the next move. Yovan said that on the morrow he would go to Chabatz and buy a suit of clothes and a revolver. They could then rob some

merchant and share the proceeds, after which Petko must escape into Austria to America. The next morning Yovan saddled the horse. Petko watched him ride off.

"Ah," he said to Dara, "if all friends were like Yovan. Back there in prison Stoyan Michaelovitch died the other day. He was condemned unjustly, and he used to say, 'If ever I get out, Petko, I will take an axe and kill everybody, for everybody is evil.' But when he was dying he said, 'I'm glad I did not get out, Petko.'"

"It's toil and pain enough bringing children into the world," said the woman. "Little Stoyan could have known what goes to the making of a man, if he could talk of killing them like that."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BETRAYAL

YOVAN POLANKOVITCH rode into Chabatz, thumping with his heels the swollen sides of his grass-fed horse; he passed slowly down the narrow streets, greeting with a "Dobra utro" to this side, a "Kako ste, brate" to that. Arrived at the main square he threw the reins over a post, and, unstrapping a bundle of hay from behind the saddle, laid it beneath the horse's nose. He shook the trousers loose from his legs and set off in the direction of the gunsmith's. In one corner of the market-place a group of peasant women were selling their farm produce, squatting on the edge of the pavement, with tubs of cheese, baskets of vegetables, and sacks from which protruded the anxious faces of ducks and geese, assembled round them. One small boy was walking about with six cockerels suspended from his neck by their legs. The corner was gay with the gaudy dresses of the women. From the distance came the faint tap tap of a side-drum. The noise grew louder. Into the market-place marched an old withered man; as he marched he rattled industriously. A crowd of dancing children followed him, and a few curious

peasants. The old man halted in the centre of the square; laughing and giggling, some of the peasant women floundered up from their wares and rolled across the uneven cobbles. The old man looked about him, and, evidently unsatisfied with the audience, thumped the drum once more. By degrees the crowd which comes from nowhere grew thick. The old man pulling at a paper handed it to a boy who began to read in a husky voice, audible only to the innermost circle of listeners:—

"On the 29th day of May Petko Moritch, Sava Matitch, and Rako Yeritch escaped and ran away from the national gaol at Topchida. These are dangerous criminals. Anybody who gives information which will lead to the identification and recapture of one or any of the above men will receive the sum of fifteen hundred dinars. Any one guilty of harbouring the above will receive ten years' imprisonment. God save the King!"

The old man cleared his throat, repeated "God save the King" after the boy, and walked off tapping his drum to gather a crowd to some other public place.

"Eh?" cried the outermost, "what did he say?"

"Petko Moritch, Sava Matitch, and Rako Yeritch skipped out of Topchida," answered the favoured ones.

Yovan disengaged himself from the crowd;



little did they suspect that Petko was hiding in his house. As he went towards the gunsmith's, where he was going to buy a pistol for Petko, he turned the announcement in his brain. The fact that he was sheltering Petko now seemed more ominous than before. Ten years' imprisonment. Ha! The nearer he drew to the shop the slower became his steps, and at last he turned into a café, ordered a glass of plum spirit, and sat down.

"Dobra utro, Yovan," said the girl. "You heard the news?"

"Yes," said Yovan.

"Fifteen hundred dinars," said the girl; "but I wouldn't give them up."

"Of course not," agreed Yovan.

But, he reflected, revolvers were expensive, so were clothes. If he bought these things for Petko how did he know that he would be paid back again. If Petko trying a robbery were caught they would identify the pistol. Ten years, and all his money lost.

"You look as if something is on your mind, Yovan," said the girl.

"No, no," answered Yovan hastily. "I was only wondering if I would buy an ox at the next fair."

"The man who catches Petko or the others will get oxen enough," said the girl.

Yovan hastily swallowed his drink and went out into the street. He came to the revolver shop,

hesitated, and walked on. To-morrow would do. He must think it out clearly. Perhaps he could go back and tell Petko he couldn't help him; but then, what might not Petko do in revenge? One could never be sure. He entered another kaffana and sat down to another glass of spirit. Here, as in every other place of the town, they were discussing the escape, for news had come through. Yovan noticed that some of the details were wrong, and just stopped himself on the edge of a correction. Some one from Chachak remembered that Petko Moritch had escaped three times before.

"He must be a tough character," said some one.

Yovan did not sleep well. He could imagine himself in court again, on trial for helping Petko. For a second sentence he would receive far more than the ten years—twenty, maybe. And all the while fifteen hundred dinars danced temptingly just beyond his reach. He awoke next day still undecided. Now he began to feel rather injured with Petko. Why had he been put to such unnecessary risk? What had Petko done for him that he should spend ten or twenty years in gaol on his behalf. From considering Petko's as an unfriendly act, he began to grow angry.

"He had no right—no right," he repeated to himself. "If Petko chose to present him with fifteen hundred dinars . . . besides, now he was a good citizen . . . an honest farmer."



In the afternoon, with many hesitations, he went towards the police station.

Petko Moritch, in the meanwhile, hiding in Yovan's house, had now begun to grow impatient.

"I wonder what is keeping him," he said to the wife.

"Oh," she replied, "I expect the revolver is difficult to get, Petko. He mustn't arouse suspicions."

"I do wish he'd come back," said Petko. "The longer I delay here the greater the danger becomes."

"You're going to go to America, aren't you?" asked the woman.

"Yes," answered Petko. "If I can."

"They say in America you just take the money out of the ground," said the woman; "no taxes like here."

"What you haven't got is always better than what you have," answered Petko; "but I've heard it's a fine place."

By night time Yovan had not returned, so the wife made a bed for Petko on the iron couch in the small sitting-room. But he sat on a low stool for awhile vaguely dreaming of America, wondering what sort of a country it might be, and what were the people inhabiting it; there were lots of Serbs, anyhow, he had heard.

Suddenly there was a tremendous crash. Petko started, to see the window frame fall into the room,

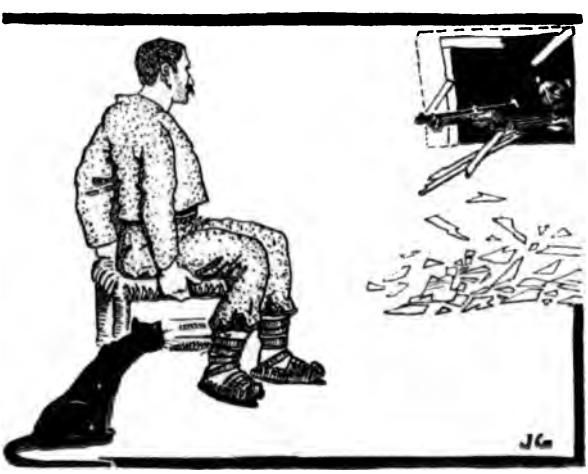
and through the black orifice the muzzles of two unwavering rifles pointing at his heart.

"Petko Moritch," cried a voice, "give in. You're covered."

Petko was motionless.

"All right," he said. "How did you know I was here?"

One of the rifles disappeared. The woman in



the next room began to scream. Petko heard a voice.

"Be silent, you fool," it cried. "Yovan sold him."

The woman gave an astonished ejaculation and was quiet. A burly gendarme with a revolver and a rifle came into the room.

"So we've got you, Petko," he said, speaking

with the accent of Zlatibor—the toughest Serbs came from Zlatibor.

"I wish you had killed me," said Petko. He was now bitterly regretting that at the first irruption of the men, he had not flung himself on the rifles to die: of death he was not afraid, but some sudden primeval instinct had held him still.

The gendarme produced a rope. With swift and cunning knots he tied the unfortunate man till he was like a trussed pig. The other gendarme came to his help and together they carried him to a cart.

"No escape this time," laughed his captors.

"So Yovan sold me?" asked Petko.

"He sold you all right, brother," said one of the men. "Serve you right for trusting anybody."

They took him to the village, and carrying him into the bar-room of the inn propped him in a corner. Soon the crowd began to collect. The gaolers, swelling in the admiration of the people, strutted before him to and fro.

"Oh, he's a terrible brigand," they shouted; "why, if we hadn't caught him, he'd have murdered you all, women and children. Oh, he's an ogre."

A drunken man picked up a large stick.

"Let me kill him," he howled and made a lurch —a gaoler caught his wrist. The drunkard cried in sudden pain. Between the crowd in the doorway Petko caught glimpses of the face of Yovan, the traitor, glaring anxiously at him.

"Ah! he's a scoundrel," cried the gendarmes, "he's the artfullest in all Serbia. Robs, murders. If we hadn't caught him, not that would I give for your lives"—they snapped their fingers.

The peasantry began to inflame.

"Let us take him out and hang him now!" they shouted. "He might escape."

"He won't escape *us*," retorted the gaolers. "One must kill men legally. He will be killed legally."

When they had tired of admiration they picked up the prisoner and flung him back into the springless cart.

"Drive on, Yanko," they cried, leaping on the back, where they sat with their legs swinging. They rattled into Chabatz, and drew up at the gate of the police gaol, unceremoniously dragging Petko from the cart and pushing him into a cell, where they tied him fast to the iron stove. Then the door slammed and he was left to his own thoughts. The stove was very uncomfortable, there were knots and bolts which stuck into him, and Petko, trying to find a more comfortable position, discovered that by squirming he could just reach one of the knots with his hand. He picked it loose, and then having more freedom set to work on the other knots. In a short time he was free, and coiling the rope on the top of the stove he lay down on the truckle bed and slept. He was awakened by the clanking of the key. The gendarmes came in. In the dim

light they looked at the stove, to see that the prisoner was not there.

"God!" they shouted.

Then they perceived him on the bed. With a curse one came and stood scowling over him.

"What did you do that for, eh?"

"Would any man be such a fool and stay tied to a stove all night, when he could untie himself?" retorted Petko. "Don't ask such questions."

"Well, quick march," said the gendarme. "You must come to the mayor."

Petko lifted himself wearily from bed. The gendarmes took him by the elbow and led him out into the open, where a few curious persons were loitering. Between the mayor's office and the gaol was a green field crossed by a path. Halfway across the path a large police-officer was sunning himself. The man was immensely tall, with a pale face and black hair, he swung his broad shoulders as he swaggered to and fro. Seeing the melancholy procession he halted, tucked his thumbs into his armpits and smiled in a supercilious manner. He stood on his right leg, his left advanced and flexing slightly, back and forth at the knee.

"Ha!" he cried, "let me have a look at him, gendarmes."

The gendarmes halted respectfully.

"So here's a pretty fellow," sneered the officer. "Ha! You're a fine figure of a man for the execution post (men are tied to a post in Serbia for

shooting). A pretty figure for the execution post. I've heard about you." And he burst into sweeping Serbian expletives cursing Petko's father.

Petko drew himself up to his full height, even so he was six inches less than the officer. "Perhaps," he thought, "he will kill me."

"Some good men died on Kossovo Field," he retorted, "my ancestors were amongst them; yours, pah!" He spat on the ground, and then to the full of a wide vocabulary he cursed the officer's father, mother, sisters, brothers and himself. "May every drop of blood in your whole family, from start to finish, rot and stink like yours," he ended at the top of his voice.

The officer's face changed from white to crimson, his hand dropped to his revolver; but a third voice interrupted the contest.

"What's all the noise?" cried the voice.

From a second story window the grey head of an oldish man appeared. The officer saluted.

"If you please, Nachanlik, I was walking here and the bandit began to insult me for no reason at all."

"He lies," cried Petko furiously, "he lies, Gospodin. Why should I curse him, save that he cursed me and my father first?"

"Come up into my office," said the grey head, "at once."

The officer preceded Petko and burst into the mayor's room.

"Am I to be insulted by a scoundrel of a Heyduk?" he shouted. "This man insulted me, Nachanlik. I demand that he be flogged."

The mayor waited till Petko had come up.

"Well?" he queried, frowning.

"Gospodin," said Petko, "why should I insult an officer? What could I get from it but misery and punishment. But as I came along he cursed my father, Gospodin. He might have cursed me for I am only a poor devil unjustly condemned to fifteen years, but he cursed my father who was an honest man, so I answered him back."

The mayor transferred his frown to the officer.

"This man's tale seems true," he said.

The officer commenced to bluster, the mayor cut him short with a curt gesture.

"I have made up my mind. Will you all leave the room, except the prisoner."

"But,"cried the gendarmes, "he is a dangerous man, Nachanlik."

"Leave me," ordered the mayor, and gendarmes and officer turned on their heels.

The mayor turned to Petko.

"Tell me your story," he said not unkindly. "If you are really innocent I may be able to help you."

Petko told the mayor how he beat Zhivko the conservative speaker, and how in consequence they had accused him of murder; he explained how he and Cristich had escaped, and of the death of

Cristich. He told how he had been induced by false promises to return, and (from here on he lied), he explained how the twenty-copeck piece which had condemned him, must have either been palmed into him by a conservative paid agent, or how Nikola the innkeeper must have borne false witness—he instanced the former murder charge—and explained that three of the four jurymen had believed him innocent.

His manner, his speech and his appearance worked on the mayor's feelings, and he rose from his chair.

"I believe you, Petko Moritch," he said, clasping the prisoner's hand. "I will write a letter to the governor of Belgrade prison, that you shall be leniently treated."

Petko thanked him, and a few minutes later was led back to gaol. For two days he rested in Chabatz while the process-verbal was completed, then he was marched down to the river and thrust on to a steamer. The small vessel was crowded. People were squatting all over the decks in groups, drinking wine from bottles and rolling cigarettes, there were mothers with babies at the breast, and small children, there were babies in cradles. Several merchants lounged in a group with their backs to the cabin, dividing a chicken and passing round a long flask of rakia. One of the men rose and came over to where Petko, dejected, was watching the passing water. He touched the prisoner on the arm.

"Ha!" he said. "Petko Moritch?"

"It is," said Petko.

The merchant grasped his hand.

"I knew your poor father, boy. My name is Yanko Nikolitch. What is the matter with you?"



"I am being taken back to gaol at Belgrade," said Petko. "I am falsely accused of theft. I escaped."

"Well, be of good cheer," said the kindly

merchant, "luck will turn some day." He walked back to the group and talked for some moments, returning with a handful of money. "Take this from us," he said hurriedly, "it may be useful." There were more than a hundred dinars (£4). The wine circulated, soon some of the men were drunk and howling choruses in discordant voices. One, an Austrian Serb, staggered to his feet and stood before Petko swaying.

"You dirty bandit," he shouted. "I—I'm going to throw you into the river——"

Petko spat in his face.

"If I were free," he said. "I'd clean the decks with your back."

The Serbian merchants ran up and fell on the drunkard. There was a free fight, and the sot was dragged away, bleeding from several cuts.

Slowly the steamer nosed her way down the river, drawing up at last at the Belgrade quay. Petko between his guards was marched up to the higher "grad." The governor of the gaol was waiting for them, his face was flushed with anger.

"God forget you, Novitza," he shouted to the leader as they came within call. "Why did not you kill him, when you had the chance? Why have you brought him back to me? If you had killed him I would have got you the Takovsky Cross."

"He did not resist," said Novitza sullenly.

"Resist!" shouted the governor, "what the

devil does that matter? Who was to know? Well, you've brought him. Take him away, put the heaviest irons on him, flog him till he can't stand, fling him into the black hole and give him half a slice of bread and half a glass of water a day."

Novitza approached with a salute.

"Please, your honour, there is a note from the Nachanlik of Chabatz." The governor took it.

"Take him away," he cried, sweeping Petko from his sight with a gesture. The gaoler dragged him off. He chose the heaviest irons and riveted them about Petko's feet.

"This will keep you from dancing the Kola," he said.

"Novitza," cried a messenger, "the governor wants you."

Novitza ran off. Presently he came back, and stared with a puzzled look at the huge irons. He bent down.

"Put your foot up," he ordered. Petko did so. The gaoler opened the rivet.

"Those irons are too heavy," he said, "I'll change them. You aren't a bad fellow. It would be a pity. The governor will not notice."

"Thank you," said Petko.

After ten days in the black cell, during which the gaoler brought him a proper allowance of food, saying that he was disobeying the governor, but that it was a pity. . . . Petko was a good fellow—the

governor sent for him. Petko came blinking into his presence, his irons had been removed.

"Petko Moritch," said the governor, "you see I am not treating you unkindly. The governor of Chabatz has interested himself on your behalf and says you are innocent."

"Of course I am," said Petko, lying.

"I want you," returned the governor, "to make me a promise."

"What?"

"That you will make no further attempt to escape."

"I can't promise that," answered Petko.

"In one year, if you are good, you will be free," said the governor. "I can arrange it."

"In that case, why not set me free now?" asked Petko.

"If you won't promise, I can put you in irons again," said the governor.

"I can't promise," said Petko firmly. "If I saw an opportunity I should take it. I would rather you put irons on me than that I should break my word. Could you make a bird promise to stay in a cage? Get me my liberty now, and I will bless you all my life."

"I can't do that," replied the governor.

Petko was taken away, but the irons were not replaced. Petko thanked the Mayor of Chabatz in his soul, for undoubtedly he had saved his life.

CHAPTER IX

A SERBIAN BRAVO

At this time in Belgrade gaol was a strange and interesting character named Dimitrie Phillipovitch, in whom one may find concentrated much of the Serbian spirit of those times, the fearlessness and hate, and pitilessness culminating in a contempt for human life, which in pre-war days would have been incredible to most of us, but to which now many are inured. This Dimitrie was a tall man, though he was born in Ipek, and in Ipek men are made, as a rule, on the short side of manhood, and his father, a wealthy merchant, was small. In the little town—which lies on the edge of the great granary of old Serbia, backed by a sudden bluff of almost inaccessible mountains filled with wild Albanian tribes—the boy grew to adolescence surrounded on every side by mosques, and evidences of the suzerainty of the Turk, and with only the orange Monastery, half buried in its walls, to keep the fire of the Christian faith smouldering in the oppressed bodies of the Christians. But the Greek Patriarch, in his orange-painted church behind the great fire-scarred door of the monastery, put his

trust not in God alone, but also in powder and shot; in fact, if many tales are true, powder and ball came first, and young Dimitrie, though but fifteen years old, was singled out as one of the distributors of the "solid evidences" of the Bishop's lack of faith. He hid the rifles and ammunition by twenties in cellars, helped by one intimate friend, who, when but six rifles were left, betrayed the young Dimitrie to the Turks in order to get the reward.

Dimitrie arrested, denied all knowledge, but the rifles were produced, and though the boy persisted in an utter ignorance the truth leaked out by other channels, though none were trustworthy enough to condemn the Bishop, whom the Turks wished to convict. Young Dimitrie, brought before the Cadi, swore his ignorance, even when threatened with the "mrtvashiba," or "death by whipping."

The sentence was prepared, and one day the young man was led out into a large courtyard, down the length of which were ranged two lines of men armed with bastinado canes. Above in a gallery sat the great Turks of Ipek, the Pasha, and the judges and the more responsible merchants, and amongst these, like a black crow amongst gaily coloured pigeons, the Bishop of Ipek himself, condemned to watch the torture of his disciple, brought there in the hope of extracting confession.

"But," said the Bishop to himself, "omelettes

are not made without broken eggs," and kept silence.

The Pasha leaned over the edge of the balcony and cried—

"Dimitrie Phillipovitch, who gave you the guns?"

"I do not know," returned Dimitrie, his face upturned.

"You see the men in lines before you. You will run between them till you drop dead. We will beat you till your flesh drips from your bones in blood. Do not think that your cross will save you!" and he cursed against the emblem. "Who gave you the guns?"

"I do not know anything of your cursed guns," replied Dimitrie stoutly.

The Pasha gazed over the rail at the intrepid youngster, and his Turkish chivalry was roused by the courage, and he said—

"Give him only twenty-five stripes. It is enough."

Now friendly gendarmes—bribed by the family—had given him a fox-skin to put beneath his shirt, but the boy in ignorance had put the fur to his skin, and the blows of the canes falling on the hide sounded in the Pasha's ears strangely unlike the sound of other whippings at which he had officiated.

"Stop," he cried. "Strip him."

Then the rattans began to fall on his bare back.

After the third blow he lost his senses, and the flesh was stripped from his back till it was a bloody jelly. Surgery was primitive in those days, the only way of treating the torn back was the application of hides ripped from newly slain sheep, bound warm and bleeding against the injured parts. It was expensive, but his mother had many sheep, which were sacrificed recklessly. In three months he was cured.

One year later on the bridge which crosses the Bistritza River he met the treacherous friend. The moment was lonely—it was evening—the other tried to bluster, but the sixteen-year-old Dimitrie took him by the throat and flung him into the river, which was swollen with the melting snow from the mountains. He was again arrested, but there was no evidence; the boy had been drowned in the Bistritza and there were marks on his throat, but that was all. Dimitrie was released.

The "rakia" (plum brandy) of Ipek is renowned over the Sanjak, and that of Dimitrie's house was renowned in Ipek. Many came to drink of it, even Turks defying the commands of the Prophet. When Dimitrie was eighteen an Albanian chief learned the illicit joys of the Dimitrie "rakia," and though the Serbs were generous enough the exactions of this bravo became too heavy, for he carried off beneath his waistcoat some two litres each night—and rakia is usually drunk as a liqueur. One evening Dimitrie said to his mother—

"You will give this Albanian ruffian no rakia if he does not pay for it."

The mother answered, "But he is terrible; he will kill us all. Are you not afraid of that wolf?"

Dimitrie said, "I fear nobody, not even tigers." And he told the servant also to refuse drink to the importunate chieftain.

In the evening came the man. He was six foot three and his face in the many swathings of his headdress was dark and terrible when he heard that Dimitrie had said, "No rakia without money."

"Tell Dimitrie if he does not give me rakia I will come down and shoot the barrels so full of holes that not one drop of drink is left."

"Dimitrie says you must pay," returned the trembling servant.

The Albanian thrust him on one side and strode down the cellar steps into the darkness where Dimitrie crouched. Bang went the revolver, and the first big barrel began slowly to empty its odorous contents on to the cellar floor. But Dimitrie leapt from the darkness on to the man's shoulders, driving him to the floor when he pinioned his hands and took possession of the weapon.

The mother crept nervously down into the gloom, crying—

"Do not shoot, Dimitrie, or the rakia will take fire, and we will be all burned up."

"I am not going to shoot," replied Dimitrie. He drew out his knife and slit the Albanian's

mouth to his ears; then he forced him to eat bacon, which is defilement, and then he condemned him to make the sign of the cross on his forehead.

Cowed and humiliated the Turk said, "Dimitrie Phillipovitch, you are a great hero. Who can stand up against you? If you will not publish my shame abroad, I will give you the Besa of my house, and will swear to protect you and will say nothing of this to the Turks."

Dimitrie agreed, and received the Albanian into his own home, cured him and set him free. The Turk kept his word and did not denounce Dimitrie to the governor.

At the age of nineteen Dimitrie married a fine girl of the district. On the night of the wedding three Turks came to his house, saying—

"Happy days to thee. We come late, for we are of the police and have been on duty."

Dimitrie feasted them and gave them rakia, which, for all they were Anatolians, they drank with gusto and more than was good, for, becoming drunk, they wished to take advantage of an old custom in Macedonia and the Sanjak, which gave the conquerors the first rights on the bride. But Dimitrie had no mind to give up his wife, and as Christians could carry no arms, he seized the revolver from one and killed them both as they reclined, drunk and lascivious, on the divan.

He escaped, followed by the Turks, to an old mill, from which he killed six more, and thence

escaped to Serbia, finding there a companion with whom he returned to the Sanjak and Albania, where these two remained living the free life and killing every Turk that they met.

His wife and mother escaped from Ipek and found also a home in Serbia, to which Dimitrie returned after each expedition of slaughter and revenge. For three years he was in command of the guards of the frontier.

In Pristina the Serbian consul was killed by the Turkish freebooters, and the newly-appointed man, Brana Novchitch, refused to venture if the Government would not appoint Dimitrie as chief Kvass to the consulate. No other would do, and the appointment was made, so Dimitrie came again to a residence in the Sanjak, but he was a naturalized Serbian and the Turks could do nothing to him.

In those days the Christians in Turkish Serbia were not allowed to ride, being forced to walk, crouched in an attitude of permanent humility. Dimitrie began to teach them pride, and showed them how they might defend themselves.

Great offence being caused to the Turks, for Dimitrie defied them openly, they formed a plot to disable his horse and to kill him during an absence of the consul and the Christian Albanian, the other "terror." But in the night the horse cried out in its pain, and Dimitrie, hearing, fled to the cellars, where presently the Turks traced him.

"Come out, Dimitrie Phillipovitch," they cried.

"Come and give yourself up. We are twenty men here. It's useless to resist."

Dimitrie, armed with two fully loaded revolvers, was crouching behind a step-ladder which he used as a fortification. The Turks were silhouetted



against the blue night without. How many he killed is to this day a secret, for the Turks never divulged, but they retired carrying their dead with them.

Brana returning, the magistrates sent for the consul and represented that if Dimitrie were kept

at the consulate the lives of nobody was worth a snap of the fingers, and requested the consul to dismiss him, but Brana refused.

The Turks then sent to Jakovitza, which has the reputation of being the toughest town in all the region, requesting six of the bravest and most terrible roughs.

On the evening of Dimitrie's Slava he was walking along the main street of Prizren with his little daughter, aged four years, when he saw the six Turks debouch from a side street and advance, an ominous group, towards him. He eyed the newcomers for a moment and said to his child—

"My soul, go to the other side of the road for a moment."

The child went tripping, and the leader of the Turks, coming forward, said—

"Are you that man, Dimitrie Phillipovitch?"

Dimitrie's answer was a rapid salvo from a drawn revolver, and the six Turks lay dead in Prizren streets. Back in the consulate (Brana being again absent), he barricaded himself, and soon was surrounded by avenging Turks.

"Give yourself up, Dimitrie," they cried in chorus to him.

"Give yourself up, Dimitrie," begged the Armenian clerk of the consulate. "We'll all be killed."

"Bah! I'm worth a thousand of you," retorted Dimitrie, and he howled insults at the Turks,

handing his mother a gun, a Martini rifle, with which to protect one window.

So great, however, was Turkish fear of the man that they dared not assault, but telegraphed to Nish.

"Dimitrie Phillipovitch, kvass to the Serbian consulate, has killed six Turkish priests in sheer murderous wantonness. They were all most holy men. Each worshipped God five times a day, and he slew them to see how they would die. Command, then, that he is handed over to us."

The Serbian Government, King Milan being away on a hunting expedition, replied with an assent, saying, "Put the murderer in gaol."

Dimitrie was furious when he saw the telegram, but he refused to give in.

"I will fight the whole Balkan Peninsula," he boasted. "King or no king, only try to get in here."

Milan, the king, was furious with his ministers when he heard of their reply.

"If only we had in Serbia twenty such as Dimitrie," he cried, "we would crush the Turks to-morrow."

Another wire was sent, countermanding the first, and ordering that Dimitrie be sent with his family and all his provisions in the charge of sixty gendarmes to Serbia, there to be tried. He was guarded zealously till he came to Aristovatz, but there the king met him, released him from gaol,

gave him a present of thirty Napoleons and the right of all the railways in Serbia and appointed him controller of the tobacco monopoly.

At this time a band of brigands infesting the district between Krusevatch and Lescovatz, into Dimitrie's hand was put the task of purging the country. He took only one companion and, travelling secretly, came to the small village where he had learnt was a traitor in communication with the banditti.

One can picture the scene.

The man crouching over his fire, a knock at the door, which opened to two men, one tall and gaunt-faced with eyes which burnt like tormented souls.

"Good morning," said the domachin, and "good morning" returned one of the mysterious visitants, seating himself gloomily by the fire. Surely there must be something terrible in the every action of such a man. He moved his eyes on the peasant who was waiting.

"This gang of brigands," he said abruptly, "tell me about them."

The man spread out bewildered hands.

"But, sir, I know nothing of brigands."

"Good," replied Dimitrie. "We will see. I will tie you to the house-post. You have luckily here a fine fire. Your pretty children"—pointing—"each shall roast like a new potato, one after the other. You will then die by the slowest of tortures, nails beneath your nails for instance, lighted

splinters of wood in your flesh. . . . How do you like that, eh?"

The man fell on his knees.

"Mercy, mercy! I will tell all. There are fifteen in the band and all Turks. But the leader is a terrible man, an Albanian. If you can kill him, all right; but if you do not, look out for yourself. If you kill all the rest of the band he will follow you to the corners of the earth."

"Show me the place where they meet," replied Dimitrie.

It was a low shack of rough timber covered with leaves, used occasionally by herdsmen.

"They meet here, and to-night," said the traitor. "But be warned. Hassan Agar is a terrible man, gospodin."

Dimitrie stood a moment in thought.

"What time?"

"After dark."

"Good. You may go, and if one whisper leaks out I will come again to your house, and then there will no more be either house or family."

Dimitrie looked about the shack. On one side was a plank of oak, very thick, on which the herders crushed the salt for their cattle. He heaved it between the rafter poles of the rough roof.

"I will lie there," he growled.

Then he and his companion dug a pit to one side of the door, just outside the hovel. The day was now fading and they took up their positions,

the leader lying on the plank and the follower crouched in his sheltering hollow. As the traitor had said, fifteen Turks arrived just after darkness, and soon had made a fire with the wood and straw which was in readiness. Dimitrie lay on his plank, wondering how he was to identify the formidable leader.

A bandit said, however, "Hassan Ali, what is the time?"

And at that one who drew from his pocket a watch Dimitrie aimed. He fired.

The great Albanian tottered and fell face down on to the fire which went out leaving the shed in darkness. The Turks not knowing whence came the shot were terrified, and ran to the door of the shed, at which the companion fired from the trench, killing three outright. The Turks ran back into the shed to rescue Hassan Agar, for he had five hundred Napoleons in gold in his pockets, but Dimitrie had descended from the roof and he stood over the fallen bandit, keeping them at bay. The comrade kept up his fusillade from the trench. Villagers, attracted by the firing, came up and the Turks fled. Dimitrie followed them to the door, but Hassan Agar, who was not dead—though Dimitrie's shot had gone through his left kidney—sat up and fired his revolver at his conqueror. Dimitrie dodged, sprang on to the Turk, gripping the revolver from him and firing the remaining five bullets point blank into his body. The Albanian

fell back into the fire. Dimitrie ran out to find his partner, but the latter had pursued the fleeing Turks and was not to be seen.

When he had returned, the two went back into the shed to get the body of Hassan Agar, but he was not there. A hole in the back of the shed, and a trail of blood marked his passage.

The blood trails went a hundred yards into the forest where the Albanian lay against a tree, his rifle resting along his legs and pointing down the only path. The partner ran ahead.

Dimitrie called out, "Circle, circle," but the eager young man ran straight on, and the brigand, firing, drove a bullet through the other's heart, who fell dead.

The Albanian then laughed, and cried to Dimitrie—

"Giaour, do not shoot; in two minutes I am dead."

Dimitrie came to him, marvelling at the other's great strength, for both his kidneys were blown away, his back was broken, and three other bullets were in his body in mortal places. Yet he had crawled on his arms one hundred yards. The doctors said that few men like him were born, one perhaps in each five hundred years.

He died in the dawn, Dimitrie having promised to send word to his family. For this deed he received two hundred of the five hundred Napoleons from the Government.

Two years later he was in the company of four other Serbs—a doctor, an officer of the tobacco monopoly, and two comptrollers of the same. Dimitrie was coughing, and the doctor made some insulting remark. Dimitrie answered hotly, and knowing well the character of their opponent the others drew without more ado their revolvers and shot him. One bullet struck him in the left knee and one in the groin, but Dimitrie, dropping to his other knee, shot all four stone dead beneath the street lamps. For this he was arrested.

Ten times the district court sentenced him to death, and ten times the upper court of Belgrade —composed of forty citizens and twelve judges —quashed the sentence, but each time he was rearrested and retried, and recondemned. At the eleventh trial the judge asked in astonishment—

"But how many men have you killed?"

Dimitrie: "I don't know; I counted to a hundred and then I lost count."

Judge: "How ever do you sleep?"

Dimitrie: "I sleep like a baby. I have nothing on my soul."

Judge: "You have also killed Serbs?"

Dimitrie: "Yes—spies, traitors, bandits, or those who would kill me."

Judge: "Why did you kill so many men?"

Dimitrie: "The Serbs for reasons I have given, and Turks because they were Turks."

Judge: "Is that the only reason, because they were Turks?"

Dimitrie (smiling): "You poor ignorant. Isn't that reason enough?"

After his eleventh condemnation the High Court gave in, but Alexander, the then king, commuted his sentence to ten years, and at this time he was in Belgrade gaol where Petko met him. But after serving for two years he received an amnesty, went to Albania and continued his career of blood.

Eventually he was trapped at Ljetnitza, in the house of a Serbian woman, and shot as he was leaving the door.

CHAPTER X

INTO BULGARIA

THE summer struck hot in Belgrade gaol, the sun glared down on the deep prison yard, into which the cooling breezes did not penetrate, and the panting prisoners followed the little patches of shadow carefully round the square cursing the heat, and their own misfortunes. This was the period when dysentery hovered, ready to sweep off the weaklings to Topchida. In the evenings, however, when the shadows grew long and only the eastern wall high up glowed in the light of the sinking sun, the captives came out resuming their normal occupations of singing, tale-telling, drinking, and gambling. In one corner five or six lean-faced men sat intent over a pack of cards, cigarettes hung limp and unlit from the corners of pursed mouths, as the money moved to and fro. At last one of the men pulled his pockets inside out.

"No more," he said; "and my luck was turning." He hesitated for a moment, reluctant to leave the game. "Look here," he went on; "I've got that sweater my sister smuggled in. Who'll buy that?"

Petko Moritch looked up from the game. "If you want to go on gambling, Stephan," he said carelessly, "I'll give you some money for it. It may be useful in the winter."

"It's yours," cried Stephan, sitting down again. "Come on, brothers. My luck is going to turn."

But it did not, and soon Stephan, completely ruined, was forced to withdraw from the game. He went slowly to his cell, and presently came back with the sweater.

"Here you are, Petko," he said, pushing the coloured wool garment into the other's hands.

Petko rolled it up and tucked it under his arm; then he lost himself once more in the game.

Petko Moritch, by the good graces of the governor, had open-air work to do during the day-time, and so escaped the fœtid heat of the gaol square. He was employed in the hospital yard doing odd jobs, unloading carts, and such rough work. Beyond the hospital yard wall was the zoo, and all day long one could hear the noises of the beasts, themselves prisoners for life. Petko Moritch, distrusting the governor's promises of liberty within a year, consistently refusing to give his parole, had formulated a plan of escape, startling in its simplicity. The woollen sweater, and a blue cloth cap—which he had purchased from a prisoner employed as a government tailor, who had stolen the same—were all the accessories necessary. One morning as Petko Moritch marched into the hospital with

his fellow prisoners, the cap and sweater were dissimulated beneath his clothes, the sweater being tucked away in the seat of his trousers, the only place where it would not excite suspicion. He worked all day ready to seize the first opportunity, but none occurred. On the next day, however, a moment came when all the other prisoners were taken off, and for a moment he was left alone.

Against the wall of the Zoological garden was a small shack of rough timber and hurdles, used as a coffee-roasting shed. Petko sprang within, hurriedly pulled out the sweater, which he slipped over his uniform, drawing it down so that it covered the black R's on his thigh; he flung the tell-tale white cap into a corner and pressed the blue one in its place, clambered through the top of the shack on to the zoo wall and dropped inside the gardens. He slouched across the enclosure looking like a labourer on a holiday. It was still early morning; there were no visitors, and, uninterrupted, he passed out by the main gates on to the road. To his right hand stretched a large field of full-grown maize, the plants almost as high as a man's head. Glancing to right and left to see that he was not observed he crept into the maize and made his way across the field. On the far side he came to another road, and not far along found a culvert made to carry off the winter storm water, but now deep bedded in long grass. He crept in and sat crouched, his head bent by the curving top

of the arch. He was free once more. He lay quite still, for he knew that soon the search parties would be out for him. In the evening he saw the grassy door of this hiding-place shaken, and between the parted grass a small terrier pushed



into the culvert. The dog sat with half-opened mouth and hanging tongue. Petko called gently to it, but it did not move; it sat panting and staring, its tongue flapping to and fro. There was a sort of sardonic smile about its wide mouth.

Petko thought, "If you bark, my beauty, I'm done." He had ideas of grabbing the dog, and of strangling it, but it was too far away for a certain grip, and if he only excited it . . . So he sat motionless, watching the dog, while the dog watched him. After nearly half an hour the dog wheeled round and disappeared in the grass.

"I wonder," said Petko to himself, "if that dog has been a robber too." At night-time he set out, there was food in plenty, for the corn cobs were soft and succulent, so sleeping by day and travelling by night he bent his steps south-west towards Bulgaria. There were no travellers to cause him alarm, and on the sixth night he came into Pirot, the little frontier town where the carpets come from. He hid in the fields all day, and in the night just before the folks had gone to bed, he went boldly up to one of the principal houses and knocked on the door. A girl came to the door and Petko stepped inside.

"Is the master in?" he asked.

The man came.

Petko turned his face to the light.

"Eh," cried the man astounded, "it's never——"

"Yes, it is," interrupted Petko, seizing his arm.

"Come in, come in," said the other, and dragged him into an inner room. "So you've got away."

"Yes," said Petko. "Can you spare me clothes and money? I'm going to Bulgaria."

"Of course," said the other, "of course, my boy. Anything I can do to help? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to Bulgaria," said Petko.

"Then your best plan is to pretend you are a Serb, but that you have deserted from the Serbian army. They will treat you well then. Otherwise they might ask too many questions."

Dressed in civil clothes, he set out in the late afternoon for Tsaribrod, the frontier town. He did not keep to the road, for too many questions are asked on the frontiers, but walked along the fields at such a distance that he could orientate himself. As it grew darker he came closer to the road so that he should not lose his way. At one point two soldiers were walking with a dog, and Petko crouched in the ditch, terrified lest the dog should smell him and give warning, but they passed unsuspecting. As soon as he could see the church of Tsaribrod, he struck out to the right, passing round the town in a great semicircle. Coming to a high fence, he climbed it, and leapt over. Immediately a figure like a great bear jumped upon him. The two figures struggled for a moment, then Petko realizing that it was no animal, shook himself loose.

"Who are you?" cried his opponent, speaking a dialect half Serb half Bulgar.

"Am I in Bulgaria?" asked Petko.

"Yes," returned the other.

"Thank God," said Petko. "Don't be afraid, brother, I am a corporal of the fifteenth battalion, Serbian army, and I have deserted."

"Then you are not a melon thief," said the other.

Petko laughed, "What do I want with your melons? An officer insulted me, so I hit him. They were going to shoot me, so I ran away."

"That is different, of course," said the melon guard, who was wrapped in sheepskins. "Come here and have some coffee, brother." He led Petko to a shack where a small fire was burning.

"There is food," he said, waving to a loaf of bread and a small round wooden box of cheese.

Petko shared the frugal meal gladly, then he rose and said—

"Thank you, brother. I must be going on, it's too near the frontier."

"You are going to pass the Stara Planina to-night?" asked the melon guard.

"If I can," said Petko.

"Do you know the way?"

"Oh, of course," lied Petko.

"Well, good-bye, good journey."

Petko set off in the night. In an hour's time though he was lost, he continued to walk hoping to find the road, but at length, exhausted, sat beneath a

tree to await the dawn. It was bitterly cold, fourteen hundred feet above the sea level, and the beginning of September. Petko was thin and underfed —one does not get fat in gaol—his clothes were for summer rather than winter. He shivered all the night unutterably wretched, and in the dawn seeing a large communal dwelling house—the Bulgars live, grandfather, father, and children all under one roof—he made towards it. At the doorway of the many-windowed dwelling an old man was sending the children off with the herds. As Petko approached a dog ran from the yard growling.

"Aha," called Petko, "call off your dog. I want to talk with you." The old man hissed the dog back to the yard and came up to Petko, grinning slyly.

"Aha," he said, "you're not a Bulgar."

"No," agreed Petko.

"I know what you've come for, but you aren't the first."

"Am I not?"

"No," said the old man. "Many have searched for the treasure, but none have found it." Petko suddenly recalled a legend of treasure buried on the Stara Planina.

"Ah," he said, "but doubtless they only suspected. Now if a person knew where it lay."

"How can a man know?" asked the old man.

"Oh" said Petko, "there are maps, old maps."

"Do you know?" asked the old man, clutching him by the arm.

"I think so," answered Petko. "I'm going to see to-night. I was wondering if you could lend me a shovel and a pick."

"Come in, come in," said the old man, dragging him into the house. He placed bread and cheese, and wine and bacon and sitzwarrer (cheese and flour made into an omelette) before him, and sat grinning across the table.

"So you know where is the treasure?" he said.

"I believe I do," answered Petko. "If you will have a spade and a pick ready to-night, we can search together."

"Halves?" said the old man.

"Certainly," answered Petko, humouring his delusion.

After having eaten he went out, promising to return in the evening for the treasure hunt. He gained the high-road and walked along it towards Sofia.

Two travellers came along the road, and Petko, being out of tobacco, stopped one. The man looked at him suspiciously.

"You're no Bulgar," he said.

"No," answered Petko. "My name is Milan Markovitch. I was a corporal in the fifteenth battalion. An officer insulted me so I struck him. To avoid punishment I have deserted."

The man clapped him on the back.

"Good boy, good boy," he cried. "Ah, these Serbian officers! You could not have met a better man than myself. This is my son. Come back with us to Tsaribrod. The mayor is a great friend of mine. He will give you a passport to Sofia, and everything will be all right, otherwise you would have got into trouble."

Petko hesitated.

"But if I go back to Tsaribrod I may be arrested."

"No, no. I will see that you are all right. You can stay in the hotel. Besides, Tsaribrod is not in Serbia, they cannot do anything to you."

Petko frowned.

"All right," he said, "I will come, and thank you."

That evening, accompanied by a gendarme, he set out for Sofia, a free man.

CHAPTER XI

GOOD SAMARITANS

PETKO MORITCH, his right hand bound in a rag, was pushing his way through a crowded street of Yamboul in Bulgaria. He was even thinner than when he had escaped from Belgrade gaol, for a fever had struck him in Philippopolis, and stamina was lacking him to shake it off. He had grown weak and weaker with the recurrent attacks, and finding all kinds of work too hard, having in addition injured his hand only the day before in a stone quarry, he had just come to a petulant decision that never would he work again. His alternative was robbery. To the Balkan of those days—as to the French Apaché to-day—robbery was a profession, a game of chance, there was none of the moral degradation implied by the codes of England for example; robbery had in fact only ceased to be the honourable profession, and Petko had just decided that in his physical condition no other profession was possible. He was pushing his way through the crowds, glancing right and left into the dark, ramshackle shops with their low roofs, wondering how he could get information of

some profitable "job," when a man bounded into his arms. The stranger was in evident haste, and attempted to disappear in as unceremonious a manner as he had appeared, but the sudden cannonade had hurt Petko's hand, and he held him by the arm.

"You come fast, my friend," he said.

"Did I? Yes," babbled the other, glancing hurriedly over his shoulder. He held something in a clenched hand against his heart. "Let me go, curse it." In the market beyond rose a sudden cry.

"The thief, the thief! Stop the thief!"

"Ho! ho!" said Petko.

"You're a Serb," answered his captive, "come on then." And dragging Petko with him, he pushed through the crowd, passing down a side street, out again into the crowd, across it and again into a side street. A stream was before them, crossed by a broad wooden bridge, the stranger scrambled down the bank, urging Petko before him and crawled beneath the old timbers.

"That's all right," he said panting, for he was no longer young. "We're safe now." He showed a leather bag and poured the contents into his hand, there were some three napoleons in all.

"That's a lot of risk for little money," commented Petko.

"What's your name?" asked the man.

"Milan Markovitch," said Petko.

"Serb?"

"Montenegrin."

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing. Too ill to work."

"Got any money?"

"No."

"Here," said the man holding out ten francs. Petko took them and slipped the coins into his pocket. "I suppose you're going to . . . ?" the man made a significant gesture of bursting a lock.

"I suppose so," said Petko.

"If you go straight over this bridge, take the third alley to the left and go on till you see a white house with a green door, just in front in the street is a well. Knock and ask for Georgitch, he's there."

"Georgitch!" cried Petko.

"Yes, he's here for a day or two. But he never stops long. You go and see him. Perhaps he'll help you." The man flung the stolen bag into the water.

Petko crawled from underneath the bridge, and soon was knocking at Georgitch's door. A fat-faced Serb woman admitted him. He was shown up a dank unwholesome staircase into an upper whitewashed room, with wide windows and a crazy balcony. On the wooden bed an oldish man with heavy grey eyebrows was lying in a *négligé* of white pyjama-like underclothing on the bed. The floor about was littered with cigarette ends

and white with tobacco ash. He half rose as Petko entered.

"Ha!" he growled. "Who are you?"

Petko looked at the robber and the hero of Serbian songs, the stopper of mail-coaches, famed for his bravery.

"I am Milan Markovitch," he said.

"And what do you want?"

"Nothing, brother. I came to see you."

"Sit down and have a cigarette," said Georgitch more kindly. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"Nothing," said Petko. "I deserted from the Serbian army, and escaped here. I am too ill to work. That is all."

"That was luck, brother," agreed Georgitch. "What are you going to do?"

"I was thinking of robbing somebody," said Petko.

Georgitch leant over and felt his wrist.

"You're a sick man yet," he said. "You'd be caught as sure as I'm alive. Don't be a fool."

"I've got to have money to live," said Petko.

The robber turned over on the bed. He pulled a leather purse from beneath the pillow and took therefrom five gold coins.

"There," he said handing them to Petko. "Take this 100 lef. You can live on that for ten weeks, at least; living is dirt cheap now, you ought to get along well on 1f. 50 a day. Go to Burgos

and stay there. If that does not cure you nothing will. The healthiest place in the Balkans. I'll meet you in Burgos sometime. When you are better we can talk over something. I want a partner, and I like your face."

The next day Petko set out. He remained in Burgos two weeks when the claims of a mountain village on the Shipka Balkan attracted him, and he set off again, chasing health round Bulgaria. He had a companion, a Dalmatian, named Mecho.

They tramped along enjoying the autumn weather, clambering higher and higher into the mountains.

"Ha," cried Petko, filling his lungs with the fresh air from the Black Sea. "If that doesn't cure me?"

Mecho tramped along.

"We'll have to keep at it if we're going to reach that village to-night," he grumbled.

The sun sank, bringing a sudden chill into the night air. Petko hugged his clothes tighter, his teeth began to rattle.

"What is the matter?" asked Mecho.

"Fever coming," chattered Petko.

"You'll have to push on," said Mecho.

Petko stumbled up-hill, every moment the control of his limbs grew weaker and weaker. His legs would not do as he wished, not that he could wish with much energy, the fever filled his brain. Still he stumbled on. Suddenly he

fell forward on the ground, and lay clawing at the turf.

"Come on," said Mecho.

Petko made ineffectual attempts to rise.

"I—I—it is no good, Mecho," he stuttered at last. "I can't get up."

Mecho unshouldered his pack and sat down.

"Will you be better in half an hour?" he asked.

"I hope so," answered Petko.

The fever was shaking his whole body. Dusk had fallen, and the trees now showed only like gloomy giants on the hillside. The world seemed to be swallowed up in a necromancer's pool of ink—dark, unreflecting, terribly mysterious. Suddenly Mecho said—

"Listen."

There was a silence, broken only by the chattering of Petko's teeth which he tried in vain to quiet.

"Curse your teeth," cried Mecho; "listen, I tell you."

Faintly in the night came a long howl, answered by another—or perhaps by an echo; but the first cry had been too faint for an echo.

"Wolves," said Mecho.

He sat silent for some time though all the while fidgeting with the strings of his bundle. At last he said—

"Are you better, Milan?"

Petko tried to rise. He fell down again.

"I can't go on."

Mecho slowly gathered the strings of his bundle in his hand, and rose to his feet.

"What are you doing?" asked Petko.

"I'm going on," answered Mecho.

"You're going on?"

"Yes. I can do no good here."

"But you're going to leave me?"

"I can't help it, can I? What's the good if I stay? Besides, we only met on the road. I'm going on. I'll order you a room if you like. You come on when you can. See."

He strode off. Petko listened to the sound of his feet, then all was silent, save for the distant cry of the wolves. Petko lay for a while, his mind fixed on the form of Mecho ever dwindling, though invisible.

"What a cur," he said to himself at last. With great effort he crawled on all-fours gathering sticks together like some demented bird. His mind, sodden with the fever, cried, "Sticks! sticks! sticks!" Often he fell prone and was some minutes before he could continue his work.

"I'll die if I don't get sticks!" he thought.

When he had gathered a large pile, he lit a match, and with the cunning of long experience made a big fire. For a moment the heat drove the fever from his face to his back, where it collected in one great shudder ere it stormed the face, once more

burning and dry like a wind on the Red Sea. His tongue was parched, his water long since used. In his ears rang the murmur of countless streams; he fell forward fainting beside his fire.

The cries of the wolves still sounded like bugle calls in the night.



Petko became conscious of himself and simultaneously of another human being who was bending over him. A Turk, with a plump face, red fez and clothes ornamented with long brass buttons which twinkled in the fire blaze. Turning his head

the sick man saw the dim outlines of a bullock cart with patient cattle standing beneath the trees. He sat up.

"You have a cart there?" he asked.

"That is mine," said the Turk pointing.

"Will you take me to the nearest village?"

"How much will you pay?" asked the Turk.

"How far is it?"

"Four hours by ox-cart, but you can walk in two hours if you wish."

"I'll give you two lef."

"Good. Come along."

The Turk walked towards his waggon, but hearing that Petko did not follow he turned.

"Why don't you come? We have to get on."

"I can't," gasped Petko.

The Turk bent over him, he put a hand on his forehead.

"You are a sick man," he said gravely. He put his hands beneath Petko's arms and lifted him up, and supporting him, led his staggering feet to the ox-cart. A hooded woman and three children were standing by the wheels.

"This poor fellow is sick," said the Turk; "make him a bed." The woman hastened to spread mattresses on the floor of the cart, arranging their other belongings so that space was left for a couch. The Turk helped Petko up and laid him down.

"Wait," he said.

He fumbled in a bag, bringing out a hard-boiled egg, and a small packet of dried grass. He pounded the egg and a portion of the grass together in a cup.

"Eat that," he said.

With great difficulty Petko consumed the mixture. It clogged his dried throat.

"Eat it," urged the Turk. "On my honour it will do you good."

Petko having finished the Turk helped his trousered wife to scramble out on to the bales in front and pushed the smaller children into her arms. Then trudging through the boulders and mud he pulled the leading string of the oxen, but before the cart had begun its lurching passage over the uneven track Petko was asleep, and no shock of wheel meeting stone, no lurch was able to awaken him.

When he came to himself the ox-cart was standing before a ramshackle house, where the interior, dimly lit, announced an inn. The Turk was shaking him. He rubbed his eyes, and was astonished to find that the fever had utterly left him, but that he was soaked as though he had been in a three hours' rain storm. The perspiration had weakened him and he needed the Turk's helping hand to gain the living room of the hostel. Once seated he felt in his pocket and pulled out the two lef which he had promised. He felt this very inadequate, but could offer no more. The Turk made a motion with his hand.

"I did not know you were so sick a man," he said, "keep your two lef. You will need them."

Petko slept soundly, being awoken by the presence of an intruder who shook him from sleep. He opened his eyes. It was Mecho.

"Good morning, brother," said Mecho cheerily. "So you arrived all right."

Petko raised himself on an elbow.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Ha, ha," laughed Mecho, "who am I indeed. Mecho, Mecho. Wake up. You know Mecho."

"Mecho?" returned Petko. "I did know a Mecho, but he was a man without shame. I do not know men without shame."

He lay down again and closed his eyes. Mecho stared for a moment, opened his mouth as though to speak, closed it once more, and then shrugging his shoulders, left the room. He slammed the door.

Two months later Petko was struggling up the valley from Varna, towards Shumen. The autumn had broken and winter was in, down the black valley the wind howled, so cold that the very blood seemed to freeze. Three weeks in the mountain village had not cured the fever which came on at intervals sapping little by little his great strength and eating the life from his blood. A month in Varna still found him an invalid. The infernal cold wind seemed to rush through him as though he were made of canvas, he flapped his hands and blew on his raw

red knuckles, staggering on in the hope of finding some dwelling place where he could shelter. Sometimes he was tempted to lie down, but that were certain death.

An opening in the rocks, from whence came the clink of hammer and of stone, tempted him, and he stumbled into the quarry.

"Brothers," he cried at the door of the long shed lined with bunks, "for God's sake give a poor traveller warmth, before the cold has frozen him into his own memorial."

Two or three men standing about the tin stove in the middle of the shanty turned. They saw a tall gaunt figure, covered with a ragged old fur cap, and clothes torn and inadequate against the storm, supporting itself with one arm on the gatepost.

"Come in," said one not unkindly.

Petko staggered in. The side of the tin stove was blushing like an angry cheek with the heat. He gasped the thick warm air which seemed to permeate him, flinging the devils of cold out from the veins.

"Good, you saved my life," said Petko gratefully.

"Easy to do, easy to do, brother," answered one, bringing him a cup of tea.

"I have no money to pay," said Petko.

The man thrust the cup of tea into his hands.

"What do you do?" asked one of the workmen.

"I was walking to Shumen," replied Petko.

"For what?".

"I am looking for work."

"Ever done stone quarrying?"

"Yes."

"Then why not stay on here? The master wants more men for the railway. You will get no better work in Shumen."

"Good," cried Petko, revived with the warmth and forgetting his resolution never again to work.

"You can't sleep here though," went on the man, "there is not enough room. But one of us is going to the village for provisions. He will find you a room."

"Is it far?" asked Petko.

"Three kilometres; not more."

"Come on, brother," said the messenger, shouldering his bag, "there's a Russian hotel. Quite comfortable, they'll bed you for five pence a night; that's not dear."

Petko followed him out into the cold. The man turned to the right and followed a line of light railway.

"Short cut," he shouted over his shoulder.

The Russian hotel was a low building of ramshackle appearance and dilapidated aspect. On the upper story the balconies were sagging and the bars of the wooden railings were broken and hanging, some of the shutters flapped in a melancholy clatter with the wind bursts; but inside it was warm. Petko spent his last three groschen in

a meal and was shown into a small bare room. The bed was composed of three planks laid on struts, a small stove completed the furniture.

"Three groschen," said the landlord, "and cheap at that. Extra for wood and candles."

For a week Petko worked in the stone quarry holding drills for the strikers. Though fever seized him at the appointed times; crouching in a wretched heap, he managed to carry on the mechanical labour, lift and turn, lift and turn. But his hands swelled so from the cold that he could scarcely hold the freezing iron. Each evening when work was done he gathered together a meed of wood for his tiny stove and staggered back to his comfortless home over the ties and ballast of the light railway.

On Thursday it began to rain. The wind had abated somewhat, but the cold had intensified. Petko, staggering under his load of evening wood, was soon wet to the skin; on his coat the rain was freezing as it fell and the ties of the railway were covered with ice and snow. Petko, placing his foot incautiously, slipped and fell. The load of wood fell on to him, knocking his head against the iron rail. The fall seemed to rob him of the small remains of his strength; he lay for a while. Stumbling to his feet he made a few more steps, but slipped and fell once more. He got up, but fell a third time.

With difficulty he raised himself to his knees.

He stared up at the pitiless grey sky above. Was there really a God up there? he asked himself. Did Stoyan's miseries, for instance, come from God? He would test it. He raised an arm, steadying himself with the other.

"God!" he cried to the storm.



His voice wailed down the valley.

"God!" he cried again.

The rain beat on his face, already icicles were hanging from his limp moustache.

"God!" he cried a third time. "If you are there give me some sign."

Nothing, not even a murmur of thunder.

"God," he shouted, "I have done with you, you do not exist."

He pillowed his head on the rough wooden bundle and wept the tears of a broken man.

With incredible toil he reached his hotel. He was too weary to make a fire, had the bundle of wood not been lost. Falling on the hard bed he found a broken sleep, tormented by dreams in which he had renounced God for ever, and was in consequence condemned to be roasted on a spit. Round and round, round and round, with the heat ever increasing. He awoke in a high fever, unable to move.

In the evening his partner came from the stone quarry to inquire; he was a Serb, and with him came another workman, a Macedonian. They brought his pay. It was six groschen too little, but Petko was too ill to notice this.

The hotel keeper came into the room.

"Well," he said morosely, "are ye going to keep this fellow when all his pay is gone?"

The workmen shook their heads, shamefaced.

"I'm not a devilish charity," said the innkeeper. "It's pay or go here."

"I'll pay you, brother," asserted the sick man.

"But how? how? that's what I want to know."

"It will be all right."

"But will it? I am a poor man. I can't

afford charities, you know. I don't want to be unkind, but I've got to live too."

"See, brother," broke in the Macedonian, "keep him here a day or two. I'll fix it somehow."

"I'll keep him two days more," grumbled the innkeeper at last. "It is not as if a sick man makes the place popular. How do I know it is not catching?"

As the next day progressed the innkeeper grew more gloomy and savage. But in the evening he appeared with a grinning face. He burst the door open, and as Petko, astonished by the sudden change in manner, sat up, he cried—

"Here's Alexia Petronievitch to see you. That's all right."

Alexia, who followed the Russian into the room, was not a prepossessing little man. He was rather tubby, and his waistbelt showed the increasing circumference of sedentary employment. His nose was large and rather bulbous, of a colour denoting either indigestion or drink; his mouth was small and tucked round the corners and the little moustache clinging tight to the upper lip, gave it a curiously mean look; he had a reputation of miserliness.

"So this is where the sick man is," said Alexia, glancing round the bare room.

"He had no money," explained the landlord.

Alexia sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at Petko.

"Stanko told me," he said. Stanko was the Macedonian.

Petko nodded feebly.

"You do look ill," admitted the baker. "What's your name?"

"Milan Markovitch," said Petko.

Alexia seemed to taste it, licking his upper lip furtively. Presently he shook his head.

"Why are you here? In Bulgaria, I mean."

Petko reflected. Alexia himself was a political exile.

"I'll tell ye the truth," he said, "I punched the head of Zhivko Sajitch, a 'naprednjak' speaker. They got me put into gaol, and afterwards accused me of murder. So I escaped. When I got into Bulgaria I had bad fever, so have not been able to work."

Alexia smiled, the change of expression seemed to change the whole meaning of his face.

"Good boy! good boy!" he exclaimed. "So those cursed naprednjak?"

Petko nodded.

Alexia fumbled for a while in his pocket. At last he drew out a coin and pressed it into Petko's palm. It was a napoleon.

"That will keep you going for a while," he said, and called the innkeeper.

"You see that he has what he wants," he said briskly. "I'll pay. You understand. I'll pay."

And having nodded in a bright bird-like manner to the invalid he ran out of the room.

The innkeeper looked at the gold coin in Petko's palm.

"I never heard of Alexia doing a thing like that before," he said. "How did you unlock him?"

"I did not unlock him," answered Petko; "he's unlocked me."

And he wept for weakness.

CHAPTER XII

DARA AND ZHIVKO

PETKO, in the generosity of the mean baker, crept slowly back to strength—to strength enough to crawl about the village, listening to the gossips of the cafés, or sitting in the small shop of his benefactor watching him shovel the broad loaves from the brick baking oven, on to the counter beneath the long open window. The baker treated him with an invariable courtesy, respecting the sufferings undergone (as he thought) for the cause of freedom. At times Petko's natural honour revolted at the thought of his deception, but he reflected that the baker gained great pleasure from his own kindness, and assuaged the promptings of his conscience with the thought.

One Friday afternoon he was sitting in his favourite café. There were a crowd of Bulgarian peasants drinking hard at the bar and the talk was noisy, interspersed with rough laughter and indecent jokes. Presently to them came a small, rather dirty man. He rolled in at the door, glancing superciliously about, like an unscrubbed d'Artagnan, cried a drunken greeting to one or two acquaintances in the room, and soon was the

noisiest of the noisy crowd. His laughter was more frequent, his jokes more obscene. His roving eye fell upon Petko as he sat, half drowsily soothed by the heat of the stove, resting his weakness against the dirty wall, with his long legs outstretched across the floor.

The small braggart cocked his eyebrow.

"Serb?" he said.

A companion nodded.

"Ha, brothers!" cried the little man, "did you know I was a sergeant in the war? I should think so. We made hay of those Serbs, I tell you. I had thirty men with me—only thirty. Though I admit they were fine fellows, fine as myself nearly" —he stuck out his stomach and twisted up his moustache. One or two of his companions laughed behind their hands. "Forward, ever forward our motto, brothers, I tell you. We burst the Serbian lines as though they had been woollen strands. Why, I nearly captured King Milan myself. Would have done it, only the fool of a general ordered the retreat."

Petko drew himself from the chair.

"You nearly captured our King?" he asked.

"And why not?" snapped the little man, measuring his weakness.

"You a sergeant," said Petko, "and you don't know that kings don't go into the firing line. They are ten miles behind. You're a liar."

The Bulgars crowded about the two. The small

man flung himself at Petko and slapped his face. Petko tried to hit back, but his blows were mere touches. There was no strength. He reeled from the café, followed by the curses of the outraged sergeant and the raw laughter of the drunkards.

That evening Alexia said to him—

"You were in trouble this afternoon, Milan?"

"You have heard."

Alexia nodded.

"You are a plucky man, but it's no good. You





will have to go away. In every café in the town they will taunt you. Life will be unbearable. Here are two napoleons. To-morrow morning early take the first train to Kaspican. Go to the café of Zhivko, say that I sent you. I did them a service some time ago. They will look after you for a bit, till you are stronger."

Petko thanked him.

"I want no thanks, Milan," said Alexia. "Your company has repaid any little service I could do you. You have made me feel a little less a baker and a little more a Serb. Good-bye, God be with you."



Next afternoon Petko descended at the little station which was little more than a house flung down by the railroad side, before which the train halted. He inquired the way to the village, finding it a mile walk. He discovered the café of Zhivko on the outskirts of the town. A woman, with a pretty, rather flattish, face and striking brown eyes was behind the bar. As she came forward to greet the hesitating stranger Petko could see that her face was heavily powdered and that the red on her cheeks was not of natural hue.

"Is not this the café of Zhivko?" asked Petko.

"Yes," answered the woman smiling. "Do you want him?"

"I come from Alexia Petronievitch," said Petko.

"Yes," answered the woman; "Zhivko isn't here, he has gone to Yeni Pazar, but will be back this evening. Will you wait?"

Petko sat down. The woman brought him a cup of strong sweet coffee.

"You are from Serbia?" she asked.

"Yes," said Petko; "my name is Milan Markovitch."

"And mine is Dara Gologovitch," returned the woman.

"Gologovitch?" said Petko.

"You must not be surprised," saidthe woman. "I ran away with Zhivko, you see. We have come to this. You have heard of my family at Smederavo, of course. Ah, I was well brought up, I

can tell you." She lied to impress the gaunt though handsome stranger. "I remember our fine house. Educated at the big school in Belgrade. What fools we are, heigh."

Petko glanced at her amused; from the intonation of her voice he could tell that she was neither educated nor of good family. He presented her with a Roland.

"Nor would you think that I was an artillery officer," he said carelessly.

"Indeed," replied the woman.

"True," went on Petko, "unfortunate circumstances, gambling, you know, couldn't pay my debts —to a superior officer. Quarrel—I insulted him. I was forced to run. Escaped to Bulgaria. Couldn't work, got bad fever. Came to this." He spread abroad his ragged arms and then flung the old fur cap on to the floor. "Curious, is it not?" he said.

Dara looked at him with a new respect. A man came in through the door, kicking the mud from his leather sandals.

"Ah, here, Zhivko!" she cried; "Zhivko, this is Gospodin Milan Markovitch. He has been sent to us by Alexia."

"Gospodin," said Zhivko, staring at the ragged figure.

"Yes," answered Dara, "he was an artillery officer."

Zhivko giggled.

"You are welcome," he said, stretching out a hand; "any friend of Alexia's. . . ."

But facts do not long lie concealed. Neither Dara nor Zhivko was of aristocratic birth. Zhivko was a defaulting cashier and a reprobate; that he still had a house was due to the good qualities of the woman. Petko soon saw on which side authority lay, while the woman soon discovered that he was practically destitute and an invalid. No sister could have been kinder; she gave him the best that was in the house, and in return he did what he could to help the management; Zhivko, a small, wizened man, being a most ferocious drinker, though nobody ever saw him drunk. Only his eyes grew more glassy with the downpouring stream of alcohol. Suddenly he would fall asleep, and remain like a dead man for twenty-four hours or more.

The café being by the roadside and not in any central position, casual drinkers were rare. Business came in bursts, parties of farmers going to or coming from the markets, peasants travelling from town to town, or pedlars, being the chief customers. Though the general character of the Bulgar was parsimonious, young farmers returning from market after dusk were wild, and in their boastfulness madly extravagant, even scattering coins broadcast over the room. Christmas was approaching and the sacred pig had been bought, farmers selling long-stored produce for the festival

were unusually wealthy. One evening an exceedingly riotous crowd invaded the café. They were led by a young farmer who was very intoxicated.

"Come, my dear," he cried, "serve to all my friends. Sing, sing, you Serb; let us be gay." He stamped his feet in clumsy dance. "Cheers, cheers. God, what a night. Drink, my lady, drink," holding the glass to Dara's lips," she laughingly refused. "Ha," he cried, "I am not good enough. You will not drink with me. But I am rich. Ha! ha!" He pushed a hand into his pocket, and pulling out a handful of napoleons flung them about the café. "Rich," he shouted; "gold, all gold."

The friends fell on the floor gathering up the gold pieces, and thrusting them back into his pockets.

"Don't be a fool," they cried, "throwing your gold about like that."

"Milan," whispered Dara to Petko, "if that fool goes on throwing his money about—I know them, they like to seem great at small expense—you keep all you can get, it will teach him a lesson."

"Gold," shouted the young farmer, "did I say gold? Here it is," and another Danae's shower flew into the air. Petko, grovelling with the rest, returned him a percentage of his money. "Gold," roared the drunken man casting the received gold again to the floor.

"He's mad drunk to-night," cried the friends. "Come home."

"Home," roared the farmer, "with her eyes on me? Her disdainful eyes? She won't drink with me because I am too poor. I am not poor. I will become poor for her sake." And another fountain



of napoleons burst upon the café floor and spun into the darkest corners.

"Don't be so silly," urged Dara, putting a hand on his arm. "You'll be sorry to-morrow."

"Sorry," cried the drunkard, "why, that's what we are alive for." And seizing the woman by the

waist, he capered madly round her till she shook herself loose.

The drunkard continued to caper about till he came to the corner of the café, where Zhivko, already drunk—he had been drinking for two days—was in the insensibility of his sobering process. The farmer halted before him.

"Sorry," he cried, "here's a man who isn't sorry." Seizing Zhivko's arm he shook him. Zhivko did not move. The farmer shook him more violently. Zhivko's head waggled. The farmer agitated him so violently that he rolled from the bench and fell face down on to the floor. Even the violent shake did not awaken him.

"Dead!" howled the farmer, "dead, dead! There's a dead man here. Brothers, this is a terrible place. Fly!"

And he sprang through the door. They heard his voice howling, "Dead, dead," in the night. His friends in a group crowded to the door, and followed him, some cheering, some laughing. In the café they listened to the pandemonium till it died away. Zhivko slumbered on, his moustaches mingled in the sawdust which lifted in little clouds with his heavy breathing.

Dara looked at Petko.

"Fools all," she snapped.

Petko pulled his hand from a pocket. In his palm were thirty gold pieces. Dara gazed at them.

"You did well, Milan," she said laughing. "It will teach him a lesson. Good night, brother."

So Petko returned *pro tem.* to a comparative prosperity. At Christmas time they followed the Serbian custom as far as their means would allow. On Christmas eve they spread straw on the floor to represent the holy stable, singing songs and reciting verses from the bible, after which they slept for a few hours; rising before the dawn to make up the fire with the "lucky" pine logs, sprinkling them with wine when they had caught fire. The hog was then thrust on to a spit over the fire and Dara, Petko and Zhivko—who acted as Domachin—sat till it was beginning to brown. When it was roasted and the dawn had broken, each said solemnly, "Good morning and blessed be Christmas." They then took their seats at the table, Zhivko, as Domachin, stretching the unleavened bread over the table to Petko, chanting—

"Christ is born."

Petko responded, "Truth is born," and they kissed.

"Salute the birthday of our Lord," sang Zhivko.

"Amen," replied Petko, and they kissed once more, breaking the "chesnitza" into three parts. They feasted all day. Some families remained at the table for three days—such was the custom. But for that much money is needed, and to the little inn it was lacking, for Dara refused to use Petko's store.

Christmas over the weather became colder, snow lay thick over all the mountains, and for fifteen days the frost increased, binding the roads and rivers in bands of ice. Few travellers dared the risks of frostbite or blockage on the passes, but with a thaw came more custom. One travelled from Korbona. He was a man thirty years old and unmarried, and he offered to Dara and Zhivko the management of a hotel at Korbona.

"Believe me, there is a great deal to gain there," he said. "Few are the hotels, and very bad, and there is a good traffic."

But he was lying, for he hoped to get Dara to listen to his advances. The Bulgar women were very strict, and the loss of virginity was counted such a terrible thing that any bride found wanting was promptly returned to her father riding on an ass face to tail, and was probably killed by her outraged family. The man thought that the Serbian woman would be more complaisant.

Dara consented to go if she might take her cousin, for so she named Petko, and the merchant agreeing they packed up and set out, coming to Yeni Pazar by rail. Thence to Korbona over the mountain tracks was two days over Deli Orman or "the crazy mountain." The snow grew deeper and more impassable, the cold so intense that, ill as he still was, Petko nearly froze to death. Often it seemed as though the crazy sledges would never pass the drifts, but death being the alternative

they struggled on, coming at last to Korbona, more dead than alive.

Soon the merchant began to make his court, but, alas, for his hopes, Dara herself fell in love with the secretary of the county police, Hassan Mostako, who gave her a promise of marriage. One evening she drew Petko aside and told him, and that night, Zhivko being absent, Petko assisted her from the house and through the fence. She kissed him.

"Good-bye, Milan," she said. "When I am his wife I will help you yet more," and she trudged across the snow. Petko heard the revolver and gunshots which announced the joy of her arrival. He then returned to the hotel. He heard Zhivko come in, and soon the man entered his room.

"Have you seen Dara?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Petko. "She has gone away. She could stand you no longer. She has gone to Hassan Mostako."

"Gone?" cried Zhivko.

"Yes," answered Petko.

"My God!" cried Zhivko. "But what shall I do then?"

"If you want her, go and get her back," replied Petko.

Zhivko stared at him. "How can I get her back?"

"Fight for her," answered Petko.

"My God, my God! what shall I do?" wailed Zhivko, weeping and beating his breast.

"Zhivko, you deserve to be left. You are no man," replied Petko contemptuously.

In the morning the merchant came over according to his custom. He strode into the bar-room.

"Dara, Dara!" he shouted. But instead of the woman Zhivko ran out crying—

"She has gone, she has left me. She is with Hassan Mostako. Curse him."

The merchant looking about furiously spied Petko who was watching, a faint smile on his lips. He strode up.

"You knew all this," he shouted furiously.

Petko nodded. "Yes, I knew. You think you are a fine fellow. You think that you will buy us all like pigs, Zhivko, and Dara and me. Yes. I told her to cheat you. He who bites must have the sharper teeth. Yours want filing, my boy."

The merchant swore. "Get out of my house," he raved.

"I was going," replied Petko. "I but waited to give you Dara's message."

At the secretary's house he was welcomed by all.

"Come here, Milan," cried the woman. "When we are married you shall have a fine home here till you are well. Will he not, Hassan?"

The secretary nodded, showing his white teeth with a grin of glee. But Petko shook his head.

"I am going to Silistria," he replied.

"Silistria?" cried Dara.

"Yes," returned Petko. "You are all right now. I have money. I cannot live on you if I cannot help you. Good-bye."

He remained in Silistria six weeks, flying from that town after an argument in a café.

There were fifteen in the Kaffana, talking of the old heroes. One Bulgar said—

"You bag of bones of a Serb. You are here for Serbian propaganda."

"I am not," replied Petko.

"Yet you say that Kralievitch Marko was a Serb?" asked the Bulgar.

"Certainly," replied Petko.

"He was a Bulgar," answered the other. "He was born in Prilip."

"He was a Serb, born at Zetar, near Scutari," replied Petko proudly.

Several of the Bulgarians jumped to their feet.

"He was a Bulgar, son of a liar," they cried.

Petko stared about him; he could not possibly, weakened as he was by the fever, fight them.

"All right," he said wearily; "let him be Bulgar if you wish."

The Bulgars sat down again.

The aggressor then said: "And Heyduke Velko Petrovitch—he, too, was Bulgar."

"No," replied Petko; "he was Serb."

"He was Bulgar," shouted the others.

"Listen, brothers," answered Petko, "and I will tell you the history of Velko."

"Tell on," cried the Bulgarians, "that we may prove you a liar."

"Velko was born at Lenovatz," said Petko. "When he was fifteen years old he went to a communal farm at Bachia, where there were goats and cows, and where they made cheese. He saw Turks come each day and take cheese for nothing, and asked, 'Why do you not refuse to give it them?' 'They would cut our hands off,' replied the others. Says Velko, 'I am going to see.' He waited, and next day he met the Turks and refused them the cheese. They would have killed him, but he grabbed the gun from one, and shot him, and as he fell seized the knife from the dead man's belt and killed the other, then he ran to Posheravatz. That is how Heyduke Velko began, Bulgars. You see he was a Serb."

"Liar," cried the Bulgars. "You have invented it; it is all lies."

"It is not," replied Petko; "it is the truth."

"Say it is a lie," retorted the Bulgars, rising in anger and threatening him.

"He was a Serb," stoutly maintained Petko.

"He was a Bulgar," retorted the Bulgarian. "Say he was or we will whip you."

Petko rose from his seat. "All right, take

him," he said. "If you want Christ to be a Bulgar I'll give Him to you. I don't care."

He walked out of the café. As soon as he was outside he remembered that his cap was in the kaffana, but he did not go back for it; he walked out of Silistria, and never looking back came to Rustuk. Here he stayed till Holy Week, meeting Zhivko again. He told that Dara remained only a month with Hassan, who refused to marry her. A famous quarrel had taken place between Hassan and the merchant, in which the latter's head was broken. Dara had gone to be housekeeper with an old man, a judge, and was with him still, though he, Zhivko, had asked her to return to him.

Petko's illness was cured at Rustuk by an old Turkish woman, who made a concoction of buffaloes' milk and herbs, and three days after drinking it the fever left him never to return.

CHAPTER XIII

PETKO IN ROUMANIA

BEHOLD now Petko in Roumania, having passed from Rustuk—where he picked up a purse with fifteen gold pieces and a diamond ring therein—to Georgevo, where he stole sixty dollars from a shop, where he made the acquaintance of Chiki Jovan—or Uncle Yovan—and old Kara Georgatch, who had fought in the first war of Serbian liberation, and had been exiled by the Obrenovitch, and of another, a Montenegrin from Grahavo named Marco Boulaitch, nicknamed Cerne, or black, partly from the colour of his hair and complexion, and partly from the taint of his character, which was quarrelsome to a degree. This man could neither read nor write, but could speak seven languages. Presently we find Petko and another Serb summering together in a room on the "Red Lake" halfway between Georgevo and Bucharest. Here they lived a free life, living chiefly upon bought bread, and what they could catch in the woods or fish from the lake.

Upon one such hunting expedition Petko lost himself, and about one hour before dark came to

a small one-roomed villa, standing in a clearing of the forest. A woman was at the door, looking this way and that into the forest, and to her Petko went, demanding if she had food which she could spare.

The woman stared contemptuously at him. "We don't want beggars here," she snapped.

"I am not a beggar," replied Petko civilly. "I will pay liberally for anything you are kind enough to spare."

The woman refused with a snarl.

Petko turned angrily away, but as he passed into the forest casting a regretful glance back saw the woman run down the garden and enter the wood to the right. He hurriedly returned and entering the house gazed around. There was but one room, bedroom and sitting-room combined, the kitchen being a lean-to shed communicating by a door. Petko hastily searched the cupboard, finding nothing but some pots of sweet preserves; he was about to enter the kitchen when footsteps sounded on the gravel of the path.

Hiding-place was there none, save beneath the great double bed, so without more ado Petko plunged underneath as the woman came in. She hurried to and fro between the kitchen and the sitting-room, giving Petko no chance to escape. A knock sounded at the door, and she ran hurriedly to open, kissing the newcomer, who was a man, with great kindness. Soon a nice supper

was laid, the pungent fumes of which caused the starving Petko many a qualm.

After supper, while the woman was clearing the débris away, the man said—

"And when is he coming back, dearest?"

"He is away till Friday," replied the woman.

"Then," returned the other, "we have all that time to ourselves."

"Ho! ho!" thought Petko, "then this is not her husband." And the two sat again, sipping coffee and exchanging lovers' endearments.

Petko, who was lying on the ground, wondering whenever he would escape from this silly predicament, suddenly heard a queer sound. He listened intently.

"Clumph, clumph, gloopity, clumph."

Yes, the sound of a horse's hoofs were sensibly drawing towards the house; he thought to himself, "There is no other house about here, what if it were . . .?"

At that moment the woman started up, slapping her chest with her open palms.

"My God!" she cried.

"What is it?" asked the lover.

"Listen! His horse! My husband!"

"What shall I do?" bleated the man.

"Get under the bed," cried the woman, starting for the door. "I will delay him." Which was lucky for Petko, for as the woman ran outside he was quietly throttling the astonished intruder upon

his retreat. By the time he had sufficiently reduced the terrified man to a complaisant silence, the woman returned accompanied by another who flung a heavy pack into the corner and sat down.

"Yes," he was saying, "wasn't it lucky? I met the very man I was looking for at the next village, so did not have to go to Bucharest."

"Aha, very lucky," stammered the woman.

"Now, what have you got for supper?" went on the man cheerfully.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing," cried the woman, irritated.

"Well, don't get in a temper about it," returned the husband. "I've got some fish I caught this morning."

Meanwhile Petko and the lover lay crouched under the bed, Petko with the utmost difficulty stifling his mirth at the situation.

The man drew some fresh fish from the bag and sitting on a low stool began to clean them, chatting the while brightly to the anxious woman.

A cat coming lazily from the kitchen eyed the fish for one fell moment, then swooped seizing the finest and sprang with it beneath the overcrowded bed.

The husband cursed, picked up a big stiek and aimed a wild blow beneath the valance, striking the lover on the knee, who, uttering a wild yell, sprang from his hiding-place and darted out into the night.

For a moment the husband was paralyzed by his astonishment, then with loud curses he picked up a gun and followed the fugitive into the night. Two shots cracked.

Petko thought. "He will have no more cartridges in the gun, now is the time for me to



appear." And he crawled slowly from beneath the bed. The woman fell back gasping at the sudden apparition of a second, while the husband, returning in a furious temper, found himself looking down the barrel of a steadily aimed revolver.

The husband stared at the second disturber of

his peace. A wave of bewilderment lined his forehead.

"I know you," he said.

Petko gazed at him.

"Yes," he answered, "we have fished the Red Lake together."

"What are you doing in my house?" demanded the man.

"Sit down and I will tell you a story," answered Petko.

The husband had not looked at his wife, fortunately for her, for she, in a corner of the room, was almost fainting and gasping for breath, her chest heaving convulsively. Her wide open eyes implored pity.

"I came here starving, having lost my way," said Petko, "and I asked your wife for food. She refused it to me rudely. So seeing her go off into the wood I crept in to steal something to eat. But before I had found anything I heard her returning, so I crept beneath the bed." He stopped.

"Well?" said the husband.

The woman made imploring gestures.

"That is all," replied Petko.

"But that other fellow, who was he?" cried the agitated husband.

"Aha!" returned Petko, "when I got beneath the bed he was there already—he looked to me like a robber himself. But I know nothing about him."

The man's face cleared. The woman had immediately recovered her sang-froid.

"Who did you think he was?" she demanded shrilly. The deceived husband shook his head.

"I admit I was wrong, my dear. But consider how I found him. I must thank you, friend, for having removed what would otherwise have been an unjust suspicion. And now, if you are hungry, in God's name stay and share our meal."

The feast prolonged itself well into the night, and the woman, forgetting her previous statement, found all sorts of dainties, enough, in fact, to have roused the husband's suspicions, had they been of a tender sort.

Petko remained at the Red Lake all the summer, going on to Bucharest in the autumn where he remained till St. Demetrius Day which was his "Slava." He had learnt Roumanian, and was now working honestly for two Austro-Serb house-painters, for he did not wish to keep the festival of his house with stolen money.

The Slava is a purely Serbian festival, practised by no other nation, and commemorates the day on which the ancestor of the family was converted to Christianity. On the continuance of this custom in Macedonia the Serbs base their claim to that country, for though propaganda has been wide-spread, both from Bulgaria and Greece, almost all the Christian peasants, no matter to which of the three nations they have turned in their agony

beneath Turkish rule, maintain this custom which proves their Serbian origin. Even in gaol the Serbians keep the Slava, selling the very boots from their feet to make a feast, be it ever so poor.

With his honest-gained money Petko had provided a celebration. The day before the "Kolijevo" had been blessed at the church, and in the evening was set in the middle of the table, a flat dish of boiled wheat crossed by two shallow trenches filled with red wine and at the intersection of the cross, a glass filled with wheat made a primitive support for the long beeswax candle, which was set burning all night. About the base of the glass candied fruits rested on the surface of the "Kolijevo." Beside the dish lay the "Colatch," the blessed bread which was not to be eaten. It was but half a loaf, the other half retained by the priest. About these sacred dishes the secular meats were grouped in profusion, sucking-pig and bacon, hard-boiled eggs, cheese, cakes of many varieties, and candied fruits. Bottles of wine, too, were assembled in the corner of the room. Petko rubbed his hands as he awaited his guests.

They came early. The two house-painters, Georgo, the old hero of the day when Kara George and Velko struggled for Serbian freedom; Marko Boulaitch, many-tongued and quarrelsome; Sava, a Montenegrin from the quarries, and two others. As each entered he bowed towards the Kolijevo, and

said in ceremonious tones, "Sretin ti Slava," which means "Many happy returns of the day." As each took his seat at the table he pushed a spoon into the Kolijevo and ate therefrom. Petko then brought out "coumovitza," the potent thrice-distilled plum spirit, they drank to the health of the host and the feast began. After the "rakia" only wine was allowed as a drink, and the bottles emptied fast. The guests were to sit at the table all day. Four of them were singers. The goosla passed from hand to hand, buzzing its monotonous accompaniment to high-pitched throaty voices.

They sang songs of Kossovo Day, of Marko Kralievitch, of Kara George, and of Velko. The wine passed faster than the goosla, other guests came later, one or two, girls. In the evening Milan Oraschovitch honoured the gathering with his presence, a banker, the chief Serb of the small town. Seventy years old was he, but his eye was shrewd, and his old wife who accompanied him was in decent subjection. He sat nodding his head, and between the singing exchanging reminiscences with old Georgo, for both had taken part in Kara George's rising; though Milan had been with Kara George himself, while Georgo had served under the hero Velko.

"Ha, ha," cried Georgo in his cracked voice, "don't I remember when Velko came to Podgorina, a simple soldier, and how he killed the cadi and took the gold, five horses' load? Eh, that was fine."

"I remember when his message and the two horses' loads came to the Voivodas," said Milan. "'Field-Marshal Velko sends this.' Eh, they were angry. And Kara George comes in. 'What's this he asks?' 'This Velko says he's a field-marshal,' cried the others. He listens to the messenger. Then he nods his head. 'If he says he is a field-marshal I expect he is.' But you boys



have heard this a hundred times. Sing, sing!' And he thumped his stick on the ground.

Petko seized the goosla, his fine voice rang out in a chant written by Nicholas of Montenegro. Prince he was then.

"Ni manje smerti od gladi ima. . . ."

"Ha, ha," said the old banker when he had finished, "and where would we bankers be then? Eagles are beaten by metal, friend."

He rose to go.

"I thank you, Milan Markovitch [Petko's alias] for your hospitality. Tell me, where do you come from and why are you here?"

Petko spun a fairy tale.

"I am the son of a Montenegrin farmer near Grahavo," he said. "There was little to eat so I went away to try and earn a living. I got into Serbia and found work in a village where I fell in love with the daughter of the mayor of the district. He was a 'naprednjak.' I was a radical. He wanted to get rid of me and accused me of murder. So I ran away from the gaol and came over here. Since then I've been all over Bulgaria, but at Silistria they wanted to beat me to death, because I held that Voivoda Velko was a Serb. So I came into Roumania."

"You speak Roumanian?" asked the old man.

"Oh, yes. I've been working here three months now."

"And a good workman he is too," said one of the house-painters."

"I like your face," said the banker. "Come and see me to-morrow. I may have a proposal to make."

He took his leave. The singing and drinking continued far into the night, till the tall, slow-burning candle was consumed to its socket and all the bottles were empty.

The old banker was a considerable landowner,

and at that moment, needing a village manager, had been on the look out for one suitable, and Petko's personality pleasing him he appointed the young man, who, in the afternoon, mounted in the banker's own carriage, was carried off to his new duties. The banker's instructions rang in his head.

"I'm giving you this on trial, mind; but you must always remember one thing. These fellows are slaves and must be treated as such. Never let them get up, keep them down and respectful. Never let them get friendly, or they will do no work. They are scoundrels and the most untrustworthy peoples imaginable."

On every hand stretched the broad, fertile fields of Roumania, divided by well-kept woods, of which the undergrowth was cared for as though it were a park. The gay houses of the nobility were here and there like flowers, and the miserable homes of the peasants were as middens. The road wound on through gently undulating scenery. At last the driver pointed with his whip.

"One of your villages," he shouted.

A small, untidy group of cottages was exhibited. The houses were low of wall, but with enormous high-pitched roof which overweighted the house, giving it the appearance of the head of a very fat child, topped by an enormous black dunce's cap, or low mud building, capped by a straw thatch. In the middle of the street was a small white church. Here and there a few brightly-woven rugs were

hanging to air over the fences, giving the scene a fairly gay appearance. The peasants bowed in cringing attitudes as the carriage of their lord rattled by. The vehicle at last drew up before a high wattle fence, over which could be seen the tops of ricks and a few brightly-painted roofs. The big gate opened, it swung into a large and well kept yard. At the far end of the yard was the manor house, a two-storied building painted gaily pink, and with a green painted roof. The house was flanked by smaller buildings which degenerated into large barns.

Four men came forward to greet the new manager. The foremost was a Jewish clerk, who wished him good health, and said that they would get on well together; he then introduced his companions, a Serb and a Montenegrin, who were employed as overseers and boundary guards. They led him into the house where a good meal was set before him. The appointments of the house were well made and comfortable.

"Well, brothers," said Petko, "you seem to be fairly cosy, eh!"

"Oh, it's all right, Milan," answered the Serb.

A servant approached with humility.

"If you please, your honour, the peasants have come up from the villages to pay their most humble respects."

"Let us go out," said the Jew clerk.

A large crowd of white-clad men and women were waiting for the new manager. As he approached they removed their caps, bending low and placing hand on breast in token of humble servitude.

Petko watched for a moment.

"Why do you do that?" he asked one.

"What?" asked the peasant.

"Why, bow and scrape and take your caps off like that?"

"You are our most gracious lord."

"You are a man?" asked Petko.

"Certainly."

"I am a man."

"Yes, your honour."

"Well, put back the cap on your head. I want the respect due from one man to another, no more. I am not God."

The peasant looked at the new manager astonished. His hand slowly replaced the sheepskin cap on his shaggy head.

Petko looked at him.

"You think you make me feel big, when you cringe like that. You make me feel ashamed—do you understand?"

"Yes, your honour," stammered the peasants, understanding not the least.

The Jewish clerk touched Petko on the arm.

"You must be careful," he said. "Milan said that we must look out for these fellows. If you

begin to treat them like this we shall never keep them in order."

Petko's lip curled.

"I treat men how I like, Chifoot," he answered. "If there is anything wrong in my management, Milan Oraschovitch can dismiss me. I don't take orders from you."

The clerk shrugged his shoulders.

"You will see I am right," he said.

"I'm quite content to wait till then," retorted Petko, and he continued his round of the farm. In the barn golden wheat was stored in heaps, there were presses for the linseed oil and great vats for the purification, there were stalls for the fat cattle, and hayricks, like beehives in shape, built round a great central pole to hold them against the winds.

"This is a very pretty farm," said Petko. "Tell me how do you work it?"

"You know we have three villages?" said the clerk.

"I have seen one," interrupted Petko.

"Yes, well, we take all the men we want from the villages and they work for us. In the spring, first they must do our sowing and ploughing and afterwards they may do their own."

"Their own?" asked Petko, "then they have farms?"

"The farms are ours," answered the clerk. "We give them the seed, and afterwards take half

the produce. The other half they may keep themselves."

Petko began his managership by reforming the meals of his labourers. He had noted immediately the poor food provided—a cake of dried cornflour mush and a few onions were supposed to amply suffice. To this Petko added a dish of meat, which the peasants in general tasted but twice or thrice a year. He repressed the clerk's extortions, having found that the man and the former manager had been in the custom of demanding a tithe of the already depleted produce of the wretched farmers. Petko also saw the wretched discomfort of their hovels which he could do nothing to alter. The people were like slaves. From time to time the banker came for short holidays from Bucharest, and noted Petko's alterations with a cautious eye.

"You mustn't overdo it, Milan," he said.

"But," protested Petko, "see how much better they work. And they are a good people really, Gospodin. Now they would do anything for us."

The banker nodded a grumbling assent.

"They certainly work better, Milan," he admitted; "but don't make them feel too fat. I don't trust them."

Petko remained all the winter. In the spring his was the task of organizing the farms, directing what should be sown—no farmer could plant what he wished—serving out the seed and superintending the ploughing. The people worshipped him,

never had he been so happy, his luck seemed definitely to have changed. In August the banker, very pleased with Petko's work, invited him to Bucharest for the great autumnal fair. The town was crammed with the peasants and people, all enjoying the varied life of the streets; above the gaily coloured crowds, the painted houses with their painted roofs made the picture more like the intoxicated vision of a mad artist, than a scene of real life. Petko, with honest money in his pockets, enjoyed himself to the full of his powers. His favourite café was that kept by a Serb from Prizren. It stood at the side of one of the important market-places, and was always gay, before the door were shrubs in boxes and within was a billiard-table. A hand clapped him on the shoulder. He turned. A smallish dark-faced man, with black hair and big eyebrows, was grinning white teeth at him.

"Hey," called out the dark fellow. "It's Milan Markovitch. Well met, brother."

"Cerne Marko!" answered Petko; "come and drink, old friend."

"Wait a moment," said Marko Boulaitch—it was that linguist—"I have a friend." He made his way into the crowd, returning with an oldish grey-moustached man.

"This is Yovan," said Marko, "from Herzegovina."

"How do you do, brother?" greeted Petko.

"He was with Stoyan Kovachovitch," said Marko.

They drank together. Petko recounted his adventures since last he had met Marko.

"Quite right, brother, quite right," said Yovan. "Treat men like men, and they are men. Treat them like dogs and they will become wolves, one day."

"So you were with Kovachovitch?" said Petko.

"I was with Kovachovitch," admitted Yovan.

"A great fighter."

"A great fighter truly. But he was without a heart, but a great man, as you say, notwithstanding. I was with him when we escaped from Mostar, after Petko Kovachovitch had been killed."

"You were with Stoyan in Mostar?"

"Yes."

"Drink again, and tell me the story. I have often wondered about the true details."

Yovan swallowed a glass of spirit.

"You know Mostar?" he began. "No—well, we were imprisoned in the round tower which stands at the end of the great bridge built by Rade Nejmar over the Neretva river, four hundred feet in one single span—a great bridge—but we are not talking of bridges, I know. There were seven of us in one room, Stoyan Kovachovitch, Vasa Bratitch, a big Albanian, very strong, three others and myself. There were great iron posts in the ground and to

these we were chained by fetters with collars about our necks and a ring on the left ankle. Oh, they were taking no risks, were the Turk. All the time Yovan was cursing because of the death of Petko. All day long he was saying what he would do to the Turks when he got out, though little chance did there seem that any would get away. Well, brothers, one day a Turkish woman came bearing food for the Albanian—the Turks, of course, searched everything and let her pass. When she had gone the Albanian began to eat the loaf, and nearly broke his teeth on a file, for there were three strong files baked in the loaf. And the Turks didn't break open the loaf, you understand, so we got them. This was two days before we were going to be shot. Stoyan, Vasa and the Albanian filed their chains off, and it being about one hour before the "Yatzia," locking up time, they called out for the gaolers. Two came and as they entered, the Albanian—God, brothers, he was strong; his grip—he could tear the throat right away from a man, I tell you—and he gripped each—in twenty seconds they were as dead as rats—just like that. Well, Bratitch went down then and got a pair of axes, and with those and the gaolers' weapons they killed ten men, all the Turks in the tower. And then they unlocked us and all the others. There were fourteen altogether. Of course, nobody outside of the tower knew anything—there had been no shooting. Suddenly we



burst from the gate and ran over the bridge. When we reached the streets we grabbed iron rods from the counters of the shops, and struck our way through the crowds. They fled, I can tell you. The gendarmes came after us, and soldiers too. But the governor had forbidden them to shoot. Said we must be caught alive. I often wondered if he had been bribed by Prince Nicholas or no; anyhow eight of us, including Stoyan, Vasa and myself got right away. We were pursued all the time, and for three days we got no food at all; but at last, having shaken off the police and soldiers, we caught and killed a goat. God, he was good. On the fourth day we came into Montenegro. . . . That is all."

"Did you go on with Stoyan?" asked Petko.

The old man shook his head.

"He was too much tiger for me," he said.

The talk became general. Old Yovan had seen much life, his criticism and tales were of great interest, the wine and spirits passed quickly round. Black Marko Boulaitch began to be drunk, and was offering to fight any Serb in the café. His extravagant gestures angered Petko, and in order to escape he suddenly rose from his seat.

Petko turned. "I'm going to the market for a time," he said.

Black Marko laughed. "Going to give the girls a treat, eh?"

"You'd better not come with me then," retorted the other.

He swung out of the café into the dense crowd. The peasants were enjoying their festival, for times of merriment came but rarely to the Roumanians. Some were already drunk, some were dancing to the piping of wandering musicians, making little circles in the crowd. Carriage drivers and ox-cart men were bawling in their endeavours to find a passage. Petko wandered to and fro, allowing himself to be carried by the wash and surge of the people whither they would, enjoying the free over-running merriment, teasing the women, chaffing the men.

Suddenly his arm was gripped; he turned. A face, white with vivid red blotched cheeks, and parting lips was staring at him. The grip on his arm jerked.

"Milan," cried the newcomer, "Milan!"

"Well, what is it, brother?" asked Petko.

"Back there in the café they've murdered Marko."

"Oh! have they? Serve him right."

"Not quite murdered, but they've beaten him and Yovan almost to death."

"Yovan?" cried Petko, "the old man?"

"Yes," cried the newcomer. "I'll tell you how it was. Marko Boulaitch was arguing. You know how he is, and he lost his temper. They all set on him. And Yovan cried out, 'Not all at once, brothers.'" Somebody said—

"'Who the devil are you?' And he says, 'I'm a Serb, at all events.' Well, they still were



pummeling Marko, so Yovan joined in. The first man he hit was the Komesar of police. So everybody set on to them. I came to find you. I expect that they are half dead by now."

"I don't care about Marko," said Petko, "but old Yovan ——"

"Yes—let us go. We can revenge them."

They pushed their way back through the crowds. Before the café a cart was standing filled with lime. The driver was just coming from the café when Petko ran up the steps. Petko seized him by the arm.

"There's been a fight?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the driver.

"Who's been whipping the Serbs?" asked Petko.

The man spread out his chest and slapped himself.

"I have," he boasted.

Petko drew back his foot, which shot out again, taking the driver beneath the chin. He flew off the steps, turned a somersault and landed a crumpled heap between the legs of his horse. Petko entered the café. The crowd was cheering, laughing, and slapping one another. No notice was taken of the newcomers. Petko picked up a billiard cue; the other Serb did the same. Petko walked slowly to the door. He shut it and turned the key.

"Hey!" he cried to the Roumanians. "You've been having some fun, brothers?"

"We have," they cried. "Two Serbs. Thought they could fight. Ha! ha!"

"You fought well, eh?"

"Rather. We laid 'em out."

"One was an old man, wasn't he?"

"Well, that was his fault."

"There are two more Serbs here," cried Petko, suddenly swinging his cue; "now lay us out, you swine."

He ran at them, hitting unmercifully with the butt of the cue. The Roumanians, surprised by the sudden onslaught, gave back. Three or four fell stunned. A shout of terror went up from the café. Some of the bolder made a spring for the Serbs but were beaten back by the swinging blows of the cues. They divided into two parties, and made a dash. Petko's companion was for a moment overwhelmed, but Petko beat off his assailants and helped him to his feet. Bottles began to fly in the air, so with a sweep of his cue Petko cleared the shelves, sending bottles, glasses and cups smashing to the earth. Soon ten of his opponents were laid on the ground, the others, cowering behind the billiard table, cried for mercy.

"You're pretty men," roared Petko. "You could smash an old man; come and smash me."

There were sudden bangs on the door. The police had come. Those behind the billiard table made a sudden rush. Petko beat them back. The door bent and bulged. As it burst open Petko

sprang to the window, hesitated a moment and jumped down into the thick of the crowd. He pushed his way rapidly into it.

"Stop; stop the murderer," cried the police.

The café window was crammed with heads.

"Stop the murdering Serb."

"Where, where?" cried the crowd.

"There he goes," shouted Petko, pushing his way deeper in. "There he goes. Catch him." The crowd looked round bewildered. "Catch him. Stop the murderer," they shouted. "Catch him. Stop the murderer," shouted Petko. When he felt himself safe from pursuit he altered his route, making his way towards the bank of his employer. He burst into the room. The banker looked up

"What is it, Milan?" he asked.

"God, I've had a time," said Petko "They half murdered old Yovan, you know, in a café. So I cleared it out. Twenty-five men, and I downed at least twelve or more. The place looked as if an earthquake had just happened."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I just smashed it up."

"To-day?"

"Just now. Smashed it all up. What had I better do?"

"Did they know who you were?"

"Oh, some of them, surely."

The banker gnawed the end of his pen. At last he looked up.

"You've been a bit of a fool, eh?"

Petko nodded. "But they beat old Yovan, you see. I couldn't let that go by."

"You'll have to go, Milan," said the banker. "These Roumanians will kill you if you don't."

"I'd hate to go for a lot of d——d Roumanians."

"They will finish you if you don't, my boy. They killed Marko Kralievitch here. If you think you're better than Prince Marko you can stay—otherwise——" He spread out his old withered hands, "I'm sorry. You are a good man, and you suited me. . . ."

Petko set out on foot, arriving at Georgevo at the dusk, and proceeding at once to the house of the old Serbian brigand, familiarly called by every one "Uncle Yovan." The old man invited him to stay the night. He shook his withered head over the tale.

"Ah, that Marko," he said; "he's a devil—gets into trouble with everybody, and can't fight at that."

"I did not do it for Marko," said Petko.

"No. That is all right. But Milan Oraschovitch is right. They'll kill you if you don't go."

The next day found Petko in Rustuk, back in Bulgaria, and safe from pursuit. He found a cheap lodging, and began to look about for work, or some other means of gaining money. He had in his pocket a fair sum; the banker had been generous enough, and there was no immediate necessity.

One afternoon as he was lying on his bed a knock at the door announced a visitor. Petko opened to Cerne Marko. He was a sorry sight. His eye was blue and swollen, and one lip was twice its normal size; on his left cheek a half-healing cut made a red scar, and the whole skin of his face was discoloured with bruises.

"Good luck, brother," he said, and entered the room.

Petko gazed at him with amusement.

"You've been painted prettily," he said.

"Curse them," answered Marko, "but I heard how you paid them out. Uncle Yovan told me you were here."

"What do you want?" asked Petko.

"See here, Milan," said Black Marko. "I want a partner. I know lots of places here where we can make profitable robberies, but I can't do it alone. You are the man for me."

"So you came after me?"

"Yes."

Petko pondered a moment.

"But I am not sure if you are the man for me, Marko."

"Curse it; and why not?"

"You're too peppery, brother. I shall have to fight all Bulgaria next. I think you'll be too expensive."

"But I'm not a quarreller," cried Marko. "It's the others."

"See here, Marko," said Petko. "I'll make this bargain. We'll be partners just as long as you stay quiet. If people attack you they will have to pass over my dead body first. You understand? But if you start the quarrel, not one finger will I lift, even if you are torn into little pieces. There."

"Why, that's easy," cried Marko. He held out a hand. Petko gripped it. Marko winced.

"Don't squeeze, Milan," he cried.

"Good," answered Petko.

They left the house together. In the corner of the main square stood an inviting café. Before the door were ten or twelve tables under the shade of an arbour of cut branches, hedged from the road by a screen of shrubs growing in wooden tubs. It was five o'clock. The shadows of the houses were beginning already to lengthen across the open place, and the sun shining between the plants threw warm lights on to the tables and windows of the café. Black Marko waved his hand.

"Let us get a meal," he said.

Together they sat at one of the tables, most of which were already occupied by groups of Bulgars taking their ease in the evening. A boy of fifteen, lean and nice looking, was running between the tables. Orders came on him faster than he could carry them out. Marko, leaning back in lordly manner, knocked his stick on the table. The boy, turning his head, cried out "Segassiga" (immediately). He ran into the café. Marko thumped

again. "Immediately, at once," cried out the boy, hurrying between the tables with a huge dish of stew which he put before a guest. Marko thumped again. Between the bruises his face began to grow red. "Segassiga, segassiga," cried the boy, running back into the inn. Six times Marko knocked



ere the boy could find a moment in which to take his order.

"Sir," he said, coming to the table.

Marko glowered.

"I knocked before."

"I was too busy," answered the boy respectfully.

"Then here's another knock," roared Marko. He jumped up and struck the boy on the cheek,

knocking him backwards on to the nearest table. Petko rose from his chair and stepped between the shrubs into the road. The child, began to cry. The Bulgars gathered about.

"He has done nothing," they cried angrily.

"Why didn't he come?" retorted Marko.

Petko walked across the square. By the time he reached the opposite side the veranda of the café was a confused mob of fighting men. Tables rolled out into the road, the shrubs were overset. Marko's howls echoed on the still air. Petko watched for a while roaring with laughter. Then he turned to seek a meal in some quieter spot.

For several days he was free of Marko, who was first condemned to pay a hundred francs to the boy, then was flung into gaol and subsequently into hospital. On the sixth day, however, Petko met him in the main square. He looked more villainous than before, three of his front teeth were missing, another cut had been added on his face, his complexion was now all bruises. He scowled at Petko as he came near.

"Hello, Brankovitch," he cried, greeting him with the name of the great Serbian traitor on Kossovo field. Petko laughed.

"So you're back again, Marko," he said. "Take my advice and go and live on a desert island. That's the only place for you."

"Brankovitch," snarled Marko.

"Liar," returned Petko. "I told you that if

you attacked any one I'd have nothing to do with you."

However, Marko became such a nuisance that Petko decided to move to Shumen. At Shumen, Marko reappeared, meeting him in the street. Petko shook his hand.

"Come with me," he said. Marko followed him to the outskirts of the town. Petko pointed along the road.

"I am going that way to Tarnov, Marko," he said. "I do not want your companionship. I gave you your chance at Rustuk. If you follow me I will kill you."

He strode off. Marko raced by his side.

"But, Milan," he cried, "we cannot separate like this. I am coming, too. We are partners. You understand . . . ?"

Petko stopped.

"If you are going to Tarnov, go," he said. "Then I will go somewhere else."

"But I come with you," urged Marko.

"No, you don't," retorted Petko.

"But if I come you can't stop me. The road is mine as much as yours."

Petko stooped to a heap of road mending metal.

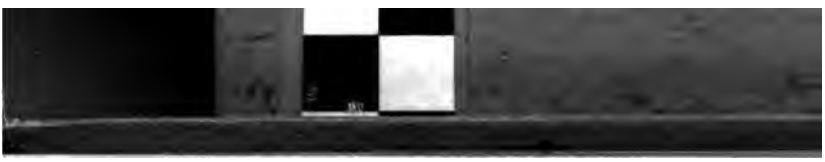
"All right. Take some of it, then," he said. He threw a stone. It caught Marko on the hip.

"But, Milan!" cried Black Marko.

"Here's some more," cried Petko laughing.

Marko protested, dodging the flying stones

When three or four had struck in tender places he suddenly made up his mind and fled, followed by the laughter of Petko and a shower of small pebbles which peppered him like bird-shot. His flashing feet disappeared into the streets of Shumen. Petko resumed his march to Tarnov. He never saw Marko again.



CHAPTER XIV

GEORGITCH

POPULAR superstition in the Balkans assume that Lescovatz is the richest village in the world, at all events, a sincere tribute to the wealth of that picturesque place, and after a while we naturally discover Petko Moritch, one early morning, just as the mists were lifting from the fields, coming down the main street with his light and springy stride. Some way before him, shadowy in the early dawn, went two figures whom presently Petko came up to, and passed. He glanced with mild curiosity over his shoulder; stopped, and faced the two.

"Georgitch?" he exclaimed.

The famous brigand—for it was he—lifted an eyebrow.

"Georgitch, certainly," he admitted.

"You remember me? I am Milan Markovitch; you gave me ten napoleons in Yamboul—oh, some while ago."

Remembrance came quickly upon the brigand's face.

"Of course. I looked for you in Burgos, but

you weren't there. You were ill. Oh, yes, I remember."

"I am all right now."

"Good." The old robber swung his bundle. "I've got a chicken stuffed with papricas. Michaelo here and I were about to have breakfast. Will you join us? You can buy some wine if you have money."

The three, carrying the chicken and three litres of wine, passed out into the fields behind the village. A suitable spot tempted them to sit down; the chicken was dismembered.

"My compliments, Georgitch," said Petko, his mouth full. "This is the best chicken that ever I ate of."

"He cost the farmer dear," laughed Georgitch. "I robbed him of it. He was fool enough to come out."

"You didn't kill him?"

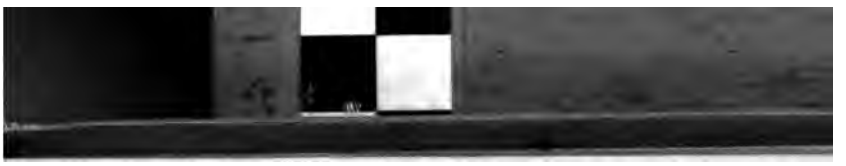
"Oh, no!" the bandit half turned. "What do you think of my horse?" he pointed to a white stallion which was grazing in the adjoining field.

"Your horse?"

"Yes. The farmer chased me, you see. I had to escape so I jumped on his horse, and here I am."

"But what will you do with it?"

"It is all right here, isn't it? It has the whole of Lescovatz to graze on. But what have you been doing?"



Petko gave him a condensed account of all that had happened since Yamboul. The story of the Red Lake had both Georgitch and Michaelo rolling with laughter; when Petko described how he had cleared out the café in Bucharest, Georgitch clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good boy, good boy," he cried. "I, too, knew old Yovan: a fine fellow. Did he tell you of the escape from Mostar with Stoyan Kovachovitch?"

When Petko had finished the older man asked—

"And what are you doing now?"

"I heard of Lescovatz, and was looking round."

"What about a safe full of napoleons?"

"Where?"

"There is a man I know. He has a full safe, always talking about it, but it is a new one; heavy, my word, yes. Another man we must have, and then the first dark night. In fifteen days the moon will be gone and we must get a fourth man, because we can't break up the safe in the house. We must carry it off, and it is cursed heavy. Are you willing?"

"Of course."

"Good. I will look for the fourth man."

"Who?"

"I think I know a Herzegovatz. Big Peter, they call him. And strong! phew!" The old robber made motions with his arms. "I tried that place once before, but the dogs fixed me."

During the fifteen days Petko and Michaelo took refuge in a wood on the outskirts of the town, it was unnecessary to advertise their presence. Georgitch came to and fro, bringing provisions and eventually Big Peter. The latter came up to his name; not that he was excessively tall, for he was but some five feet eleven, but his breadth of shoulder was immense, and in the tight Serbian trousers the muscles of his legs stood off like lumps of padding.

Three times they—when the sombre nights had come—crept down to the house of their victim, but each time the dogs drove them away. On the fourth night of darkness, however, they heard a sudden yapping and barking in the village, the cries of the dogs trailed away over the meadows towards the hills. Georgitch seized his companions.

"Now," he cried; "they're after a wolf or something. Now is our time."

They ran down to the house, entering the big dim yard with boldness. The house stood dark before them. Georgitch, pulling a gimlet from his pocket, bored quickly a series of holes all round the door hasp. For a while there was no sound but the cautious breathing of the robbers and the soft scrape of the drill. At last a dull snap told that the lock had given way. Silently they felt their way across the big room, following Georgitch, who knew the ground by touch. On the far side the leader halted.



"Here it is," he whispered.

They felt the iron case. Big Peter put his arms beneath it and heaved.

"That's a weight," he grunted.

"The ropes, Petko," whispered Georgitch.

They passed stout ropes beneath the safe, securing them so that they could not slip. Then strong poles through the ropes they lifted the safe with infinite caution till it swung between them. Slowly they staggered towards the square blue patch of the doorway.

Once in the yard they set down their precious burden, gleaning a moment's rest. There was no sound of returning dogs; the night was quiet; so dark that scarcely the October puddles showed lighter than the mud. Stooping, they raised the poles to their shoulders and marched out on to the road. At about a kilometre distant they turned into a field. Georgitch disappeared, returning with a mallet and a large axe. The safe was laid on its face. With crashing blows, which echoed through the night, the old brigand cut a hole in the back as though he were opening a sardine tin. But, alas! for high hopes.

But some seven hundred and fifty napoleons were within. They had expected two thousand at least.

"Curse these fellows," cried Georgitch. "If there is one man I cannot bear it is he who lies about himself."



"Now we had better be going," said Petko.

"Yes," agreed Georgitch; "separate. I am going on to Tarnov——"

"And I," answered Petko, "to Sistov."

"I will come with you," said Michaelo.

"I go home," said Big Peter.

"Well, don't be a fool and begin to throw your money about," counselled Petko, "or you'll get into trouble."

They separated. But Michaelo proved a dangerous companion. At Sistov he began to drink, flinging his money about recklessly as though the millions were at his back. In twenty days he was borrowing money from Petko for tea, while the people in the town were asking whence came this young millionaire, and whence came the money. Petko, considering the question from all sides, finding expostulation impossible, decided that the value of discretion was inestimable, left early one morning without warning, and by nightfall arrived in Stara Zagora, meaning to spend the winter in that picturesque spot.

But in a café he met three Macedonians. All three were fine, with swarthy faces, brilliant eyes, and the dignified movements of independent men. They had just come from Macedonia, fresh from a comitaj raid, and were only resting prior to another entry across the river Maritza into the district of Adrianople. Their tale of the Turkish oppression, of the sufferings of the Macedonian



people, and the personal attraction of the three men so moved Petko that he threw up his intention of resting at Stara Zagora and accompanied them through devious routes of the bush to Mustapha Pasha. Winter was coming on, continual rain made the life of an outlaw a disagreeable as well as a dangerous task, and Petko persuaded the three brothers to return with him to Stara Zagora till the spring.

We who have lived sheltered lives in England are accustomed to regard the comitaji as an association of murderers and thieves, which is not strictly true. They were formed for two reasons—revenge and propaganda. The atrocities committed on the Bulgarian people by the Turks, which so roused the ire of Mr. Gladstone, were still fresh in the memories of the people. The brutalities which had been inflicted were almost incredible ; old men had been hung by their arms from trees while fires, lighted beneath their swinging feet, had slowly roasted them; women and children had been murdered by slow and ghastly torture. In Macedonia the Balkan nations saw their brethren still under the same detested rule. The Macedonian was a slave; the Turks entered his houses, carried off his women or goods, murdered, and there was no redress. So to defend the helpless the comitaji were instituted. Many, if not most, were educated men. They were organized under capable commanders, took strict vows not to rob or murder

for personal benefit, and were spread over the country, following up with pitiless revenge any case of unlawful oppression by the Turkish rulers. At the same time each of the three comitaji, Bulgarian, Serbian and Greek, looking with greedy eyes at the rich country, were endeavouring by money and other means to induce the Macedonians to throw in their lot with their respective countries.

During the winter the three brothers and Petko discussed their plans for the coming spring.

"We want to join Bovis Serafov," said Lubov, the biggest of the three. "Why should you not come too?"

"There are many reasons," replied Petko. "I am not going to spread Bulgarian propaganda, brothers. I am a Serb."

Lubov nodded. "I can understand that."

"Besides," went on Petko, "what profit is there in it? The comitaji cannot rob. They must go round doing this or that as they are told. You are not Bulgars. Why should you bother about them? We can do as much good if we go alone, and we can rob the Turks and get some money. Look at you. If I had not given you money this winter you would have starved—and that after all your exertions."

"True," said one of the others. "Why should we make Bulgarian propaganda? It is the Turks

we are after, and then, why not get a profit from our danger?"

Early in the spring they set out, carrying a knapsack full of provisions, and with guns, pistols, and knives in their belts.

CHAPTER XV

THE COMITAJ

In the foothills a small, flattish glade was watered by a clear, fast-running stream. On three sides the trees closed in, their roots tangled with undergrowth and with bramble. On the fourth a steep, earthy cliff closed the glade and sheltered it from the north winds. Over the tops of the western trees could be seen the far glint of the maize fields in the valley and the blue rise of the farther hills. In the glade were eighteen men. Some were sitting on the grass talking and rolling cigarettes; three were occupied over a wood fire upon which pots and stewpans were making a savoury steam which drifted across the valley. Four others were at the lower end flinging a great stone for competition with joking laughter. In spite of the heat most were wearing heavy clothes, fur caps and padded waistcoats, and the gay tints of hand-woven rugs and bundles made spots of colour on the grass like glowing beds of flowers. At the only two entrances to the glade, one which descended swiftly to the valley and the other which mounted towards the summits, were sentries

with rifles, and another stood high up on the crest of the earthy cliff from whence he could see in the clear atmosphere the smoke of eight villages mount and melt in the air.

Of the four men casting the weight Petko Moritch was one. Two others were his Macedonian friends, the third having been killed in a skirmish with the Turks, and the fourth athlete was a Herzegovatz who had joined the comitaj for excitement. They were very evenly matched. Sometimes one would cast the stone farther sometimes the other.

Petko and his companions had now been some while on the comitaj. They had been in wild and unequal skirmishes with the Turks. They had helped to hunt to earth the Turkish or Albanian oppressors, and Petko and his friends, never forgetting their personal dues, had accumulated quite a pretty sum of money from depredations. In the villages they were hailed as "the Deliverers," and all the monasteries had open doors for their refuge. . . .

Suddenly the sentry on the height whistled. Instantly the stone was dropped, the sitters sprang to their arms, but the sentry then motioned to show that the comer was no Turk, and soon a Macedonian was ushered in by the sentry of the lower path. The intruder was a man of medium size, fairly broad of shoulder and with a narrow forehead and long, limp moustache. He was

gesticulating to the sentry and slapping his chest, his voice was loud and resonant.

"Ha," he cried as he came towards the group, "greeting, heroes. I would be one of you. I have come to join. Who is your leader?"

Dimitri Pechanatz, who had just returned from the chase of a pair of Albanian murderers and rapers, whom he had put brutally to death, stepped forward.

"You wish to join our band?"

"Certainly. That is my desire. I will tell you. Last night a Turk came to my house. I am not a rich man, and I had been saving a sucking-pig and some wine for my Slava. You understand? Well, the "swine" insisted that I should cook the pig and that I should bring out the wine, which in spite of his religion he drank every drop, till he was besotted as a sow. There was my Slava ruined. So I said to my wife I will be revenged on these murdering Turks. I will join the comitaj. Dimitri is in the mountains. I will go to him. Here I am, you see."

Dimitri fumbled in his pocket and produced some coins.

"Here is money to remake your Slava, brother. Go in peace," he said.

"Not at all, not at all," objected the peasant. "I have come to join. It is not the Slava which angers me so much. That merely made me consider it. I am a great fighter. I will fight with



you." He slapped his chest till it sounded like a dull drum. "You are heroes," he cried. "Well, I will be of your company. Show me the Turks. Show them, I say." He dragged a large pistol from his belt and waved it with a magnificent gesture.

"Gently, gently, brother," said Pechanatz. "All in time. There are Turks in plenty. Perhaps to-morrow, perhaps the day after. God alone knows." He turned to the others. "Brethren, this is our new companion."

"Radosav Bratovitch," said the stranger, laying his hand on his breast in Macedonian fashion.

The evening began to draw in and they piled the fuel high on the fire, while the sparks gushed up into the blue air. The evening meal finished one began to sing, but another interrupted.

"Do not let us sing, let us have a lying competition."

"Good," cried several voices. "A lying competition. Who will begin? Lubov, you go on."

"All right, brothers. Here goes. H'm, let me see." There was a silence for some while, then he spoke again. "I was very poor and wandering in the district of Uskub. . . ."

"Date? What year?" called several voices.

"I forget the date."

"You must have a date, you must have a date."

"Let me see. It must have been in 1890."

"Liar, liar," cried several voices. "In 1890 you were in prison."

"Of course I was. I meant——"

"Too late. Too late. Next—Milan Markovitch there."

Petko considered for a moment. It would have been very easy to record an actual happening, but honour demanded fiction.

"All right, brothers," he said. "When I was in the Serbian army——"

"Date, date."

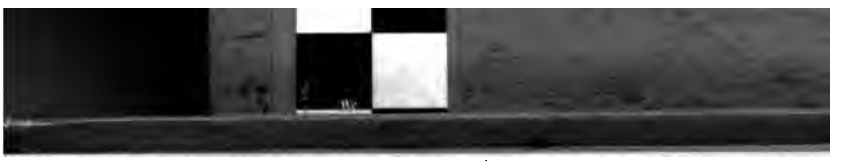
"1888."

"How old are you now?"

"28," answered Petko.

There was a moment's silence, then a voice said with disappointment, "Go on."

"I was put into prison for insubordination. That was what they called it, but in reality an officer insulted me, because we were both after the same girl, and he did not win. Well, I was put into prison and I decided to escape. The gaol was on the second floor, and a friend smuggled me in a knife and a chisel, so I determined to cut through the walls and escape. I worked all night, and in the early morning had made a hole large enough, and I crawled through. I was just about to drop. My hands were still holding the inside of the wall when I felt my wrists seized in a grip like steel pinchers. I was so startled that my feet slipped. I fell, and my weight pulled the gaoler, who had



grabbed me, against the edge of the hole, breaking his neck and killing him at once."

"Liar," cried some one.

"Prove it," retorted Petko. There was a silence.

"But that is not the end. Although the gaoler was dead his fingers did not relax their grip; they held as fast as ever. I struggled, but the only effect of my struggles was to slip the closed fingers over my hands so that I could not free them. No matter how I tried I could not loose myself. Dawn was breaking and in a few minutes somebody would see me. At last, in a desperate resolve, I pulled myself up, and with my teeth bit through the fingers one by one till I was released. And to prove it you will see that one of my front teeth is missing. That was the last finger; my teeth were in it, and, as I fell suddenly, one broke out."

There was a round of applause and some laughter.

But a sombre voice from the far side of the circle ejaculated—

"Liar."

There was a silence.

"You told Velko Petrovitch that you lost that tooth at Rustuk in a fight."

"Well?"

"He told me."

"Ha ha. Liar, liar," cried a dozen voices, and the laughter broke out a dozen times more

vehemently than before. The tales passed slowly about the fire. Some were easily proved liars, others with more difficulty.

Yovan Mitsko spoke. He said—

"I had a cousin, and a fine fellow, and three years ago, while I was wandering, we came to Konavlie. You know Konavlie? Yes. Well, there's a fine, fat, rich fellow there. In his smoking-shed were hams and sides of bacon, and I tell you our mouths watered to get at them. We saw the Domachin bring in the green meat, and we knew that every night for fifteen days he would sleep with it till it was finished; keeping the smoky fire alight. You know all that. . . ."

"Yes, yes. Go on," cried a few impatient voices.

"Eh, brothers, what a hurry you are in—we have all night, and my tale is not long. Well, then, just when the meat should be finished my cousin and I clambered silently on to the roof and began to make a hole through the top slats; they were wood, so we could easily get them off. Down through the hole we could see the fire and the sleeping master curled like a dog, and the hams all hung in rows. We scrambled through quietly on to the rafters and then we tied our belts together, fastened them to the main ridge rafter, and I, being the lightest, clambered down the improvised rope till I reached the hams. My word, they were fine fellows. I got about a dozen, and popped them in



my sack. We had agreed that my cousin should first pull up the sack, and then me, but I thought, 'What if he goes scuttling off with the hams? Here would I be in a deuce of a mess.' So I put the sack on my back, and began to climb up the rope again. You see, I couldn't trust him. Suddenly those cursed knots gave, and the belts came in two, and I fell right through almost on the top of the Domachin who was sleeping by the fire.

"My word, what a yell he did give, you could have heard it from here to Skoplje. I was rolling a bit, and a little dazed, but I managed to keep my senses, and I remembered that my face was blacked.

"'Who are you?' cried the Domachin.

"'I am the Devil,' I said in as gruff a voice as I could.

"The old fellow fell on his knees.

"'Oh, please spare me, Devil,' he cried out, 'I wish to be a good man all the rest of my days. Do not take me away now, let me repent.'

"I pretended to think a bit.

"'If I spare you now, and you don't repent, I shall take all your goods, and your wife and your family,' I growled.

"'Certainly, certainly, Devil,' cried the old man, hastily, selling them all for a few more years of life.

"'Well, help me up with this bag of shrivelled souls,' I grunted, and the old man humped the bag

of his own hams on to my shoulder, and off I went. How's that?"

"Bravo! Bravo, Sdravie!" cried the comitaji.

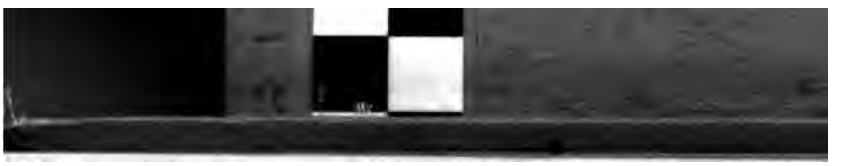
"I was not so successful," said Michaelo, "but I am quite willing to tell you how I lost. You must know first that three of us were comitaji together, myself, Stoyan, and Boris, but at length Boris married a girl with money and a farm, and settled down. Now some time after that, Stoyan and I decided to rob Boris of all his hams, as much for fun as anything, besides, he had such a lot and we had nothing, so it was only fair. I sent Stoyan to spy, but he was not very clever, and that devil of a Boris caught sight of him, and the next night when we broke through the roof, like Yovan here, the devil of a ham was there, only down below. Boris and his wife were asleep, lying together on two sacks which we could see contained the meat.

"Well, the inside of the roof was very sooty, so we gathered a great deal of it, and suddenly showered it down on to them, almost smothering them with a great lump which broke all over their faces. They woke up, of course, cursing and spluttering, and we heard Boris say—

"'Now, why the devil did that come down? I wonder if those rascals are trying to get in.' By this time we were outside on the edge of the roof, but we could hear. We kept quite still.

"Then Boris said—

"'I'm going down to the brook to wash this



filth off. Maria, you stay here till I get back.' And off he went.

"After he had been gone ten minutes, I crept down, and coming in, I said low to Maria, as if I were Boris—

"'Now do you go.' As soon as she had gone, I nipped up a sack, and off we went.

"Of course, as soon as Boris saw his wife come to the brook he suspected that something wasn't right. He broke out—

"'Why aren't you with the hams?'

"'But,' she answered, 'you told me to come.'

"'Curse those fellows,' cried he, jumping up. He ran to the smoke house, and sure enough, one sack was missing. Now he knew the country roads as well as we did, and he reckoned that there was only one likely path which we would have taken. So he followed us as quick as he could. I was carrying the sack, and Stoyan was leading, to see that no cursed Turk or policeman came along. After a while we changed, I going ahead while he carried the sack. That cursed Boris, slipping along the sides of the road—it was a pitch night, remember—stepped between us, and marched along. Now I, thinking Stoyan close behind me, hurried on, while Stoyan, thinking me close in front, loitered somewhat, and soon we were wide apart. Then Boris stepped up to Stoyan and said—

"'Change again, comrade. You go ahead,' as though it were me. Well, brothers, that is how we

lost the hams. For of course he went home as fast as he could, and we had made some kilometres more before we found we had been done."

The cheers and claps which greeted the successful finish of this tale echoed down the valley. The fire blazed up in a last glow of splendour, lighting the hard, bitten faces of the men, and more dimly the forests behind them; from where the high sentry stood the glade was like an orange bowl with a blue cover enclosing the flaming heart of some long dead hero. Dimitri Pechanatz stretched his arms and yawned. And ten minutes later each member of the band had crouched in his place at the fire and was asleep, only high up on the earthy bluff, the sentry watched the slow revolving procession of the stars, and the wonder of the new dawn.

Just as the first pale bands had shown, he scrambled down, and stepping cautiously, aroused four of the sleepers. There was some smothered laughter as the men struggled into garments drawn from a package, which lay on one side. When they were dressed, they shouldered their muskets, and shuffled off into the still darkened woods. The sentry clambered back to his post, yawning and laughing alternately. Soon the camp arose, and fresh wood thrown upon the still glowing embers, roused the fire to a bright flame, over which the coffee pots soon were steaming. The sentry having descended, another took his place, and soon was seen

making violent signals; a comitaj mounted the hill, and an apparent conversation took place; the messenger came over the hillside with a run.

"Lubov says that four Turks are down below. They are soldiers; we can easily cut them off."

"Good," said Dimitri.

"Here, Milan [to Petko], take three men with you and chase them. Oh, yes, take Radosav there, our new fire-eater."

Radosav sprang to his feet.

"God," he cried, "put me before these cursed Turks. Oh, I will show them."

"Gently, brother, gently," said Petko, "don't show them too much, for a living hero is better than a dead ass."

"Give him a gun," cried Pechanatz, "and some cartridges."

A rifle and ammunition was speedily produced, and in the wake of Petko and his two companions the neophyte left the glade. They proceeded with great precaution down the hill, meeting no one till they came to a small stretch of cultivated land which rolled over the ridge of a falling hillside.

Suddenly a shot rang out.

"There they are," cried Petko, pointing, "now then, brothers, careful. Use the ground, don't show yourselves, and creep as near as you can."

The neophyte uttered a tempestuous bellow: in spite of the fact that no Turk was visible, he fired

his rifle, hastily reloaded and fired again. Petko bit his lip. The four men worked their way across the hillside, taking cover carefully and seeking to gain some advantage of position over the Turks, but their opponents were as wily as they, and both pairs sidled up to the ridge. Here, as they could get no higher, a furious firing broke out,



Radosav wildly charging and loosing off his rifle regardless whether Turks were visible or no. Petko crawled behind him and seized a large stone in one hand, in the other holding his revolver. Simultaneously he fired the revolver and brought down the stone with a great thump on to the unfortunate peasant's buttocks. The neophyte



dropped his rifle with a yell, and rolled over on the ground kicking like a shot rabbit.

"Oh, brothers, brothers," he cried. "They've hit me. Oh dear, oh dear, what shall I do? Ah, my back is blown away. Oh, oh, my liver is exploded. Oh dear! Oh dear!"

They ran to him, and with great solemnity turned him on to his face.

"Oh God, oh God!" screamed the peasant. "Why did I ever come? I'm killed, ohee, ohee, ah, my back is blown out."

The Macedonians, very gravely, bound him up with long bandages. Strangely enough during this the Turks made no attempt to attack, when easily they might have overthrown all the band and made them prisoners. Thus supporting the now almost fainting Radosav they took a slow march towards the camp, at every step the "wounded" man groaning aloud. In the glade they laid the man beneath the shade of a tree, while the comrades crowded round eager to hear the news. The peasant filled the air with his sobbing. Dimitri conceded that the bandages should be taken off so that he who most understood gunshot wounds might attend to it. The bandages were slowly unwound.

"Oh dear, oh dear," cried Radosav.

When he had been stripped half naked, Dimitri bent forward.

"I can see no wound," he said.

"No wound?" cried Radosav. "Half my back is blown away."

"All your heart, you mean," retorted the captain. "Stand up, you coward."

Radosav craned round to correct the mistake. He saw himself whole and untouched, save perhaps a faint blueish tinge beneath the skin where the stone had caught the bone. An expression of blank astonishment filled his face, his mouth dropped. A great howl of laughter burst from the comitaji accentuated by the sudden appearance in the glade of four Turks, who seemed strangely friendly with their bitterest enemies. Radosav hastily dressed.

"Then what?" he gasped.

"You have been tried and found wanting," said Dimitri.

"Ha, ha," cried the comitaji; "ha ha, half his back has been blown off, half his back . . . And all his face, my God."

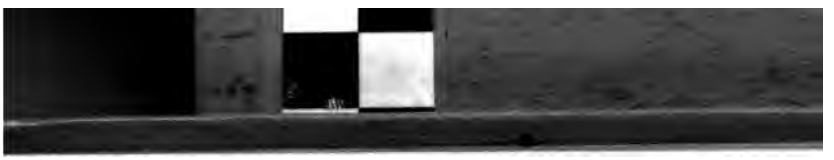
Radosav snarled.

"What, do you play fool games like that?"

"On such as you," returned Dimitri.

"Good-bye, Radosav Bratovitch," cried the almost exhausted freebooters. "Good-bye. Go back to your wife, and get her to exchange clothes."

The discomfited neophyte shrunk away, while the four Turks hastily stowed their disguises back into the property bag and resumed their own clothes.



But life in the comitaj was not all gaiety, far from it. Some hero's test was necessary. There were bloody fields where comrades were left dead or dying, there were traitors, there was starvation and continual exposure to the lottery of the elements. Small wonder that the comitaji were the heroes of song all over Macedonia and the Southern Balkans, and that names such as those of Voivoda Mitsko, Yovan Baboonski, Yovan Dovezinski, and Boris Serapho, have become almost as immortal as those of the heroes of Kossovo.

The Turks stamped out the Freebooters with ruthless barbarity and the comitaj who was caught almost expected to die by torture. But if their enemies were pitiless they too would show no pity, though they prided themselves in their justice. And so the summer passed. Modern knights of the round table they marched and countermarched the country, hiding in the woods, in the monasteries, or in cottages, loved only by the country people and hated by the Turk.

One afternoon they were lying in a small wood some few leagues from a village of some one hundred or one hundred and fifty inhabitants, when to them came a Macedonian running.

"Brothers," he cried, as he reached the company, "we demand justice."

"Tell us your complaint," said Dimitri.

"In our village back there, there is a small Turkish fortress and a garrison. . . ."

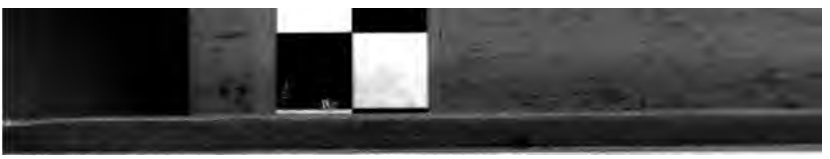
"We know that, go on."

"For some time we have been puzzled. The Turks seemed very clever, more than one comitaj has been caught near by, and twice whole companies have been led into ambush; for a long while we could not find out how this cursed 'Chaioush' knew all about them, but we suspected treachery. Now we have discovered. It is a girl, Jula by name. She tells him. We have waited for the comitaj, and I heard you were here. Come now, brothers, and take this shame from our village."

Dimitri frowned.

"We will come," he said. "It is the hour of the siesta. Take the girl Jula, and bring her to us."

The comitaj, bearing all arms, marched into the village and on the outskirts formed a deep semi-circle, the village folk, summoned hastily by messengers, standing massed in two groups at either wing. Amongst them the girl accused of treachery was held by two of the farmers. Just behind, her mother stood with eyes looking at the ground, showing no sign of emotion, but beneath the folds of her skirt, restless fingers clenched and unclenched. The girl, a fine looking, dark-haired Macedonian, stood erect, her full red lips pouting, her eyelids half sullenly lowered.



A peasant stepped, hat in hand, before Dimitri Pechanatz, he bowed with the customary humility of the depressed race.

"We accuse this girl Jula of betraying the comitaji," he said. "She is the concubine of the Turkish officer back there," he waved to the fort which stood some little way beyond the village, on a slight eminence. "When the drum rattles she goes to him. We have watched her, and now we know—that is her signal. Eh, Jula?" he half turned. The girl looked fiercely at him. "She finds out about the comitaj and tells him everything. She has even gone to Voivodas with complaints to lure them here. That is my accusation."

He stepped back.

Dimitri turned to the accused girl.

"You have heard the accusation," he said sternly. "What have you to say?"

"They all hate me here," said the girl sullenly. "They are all liars."

"That is not true," answered another farmer. "Everyone here can testify that what the brother said is true, in every detail."

Dimitri gazed round.

"It is true, it is true," murmured the peasants.

"Even her mother can testify," said the first speaker.

Dimitri turned to the old woman.

"She is guilty," muttered she. "God forgive, she is guilty."

The girl's face changed, she put her hands before her face and burst into a passionate flood of weeping. She fell on her knees.

"It is true," she confessed. "God forgive me, it is true. Why did I do it? God knows, but when the drum beats I go to him, and I tell him all. I cannot help myself."

Dimitri looked round at the comitaji, behind him. Their faces were drawn, but pitiless.

"The sentence?" he asked.

"Death, death, death," ran the murmur about the circle.

"With the kamma," added one.

"Jula, you are found guilty of treachery, and are condemned by the court of the comitaj to death," said Dimitri gravely. "Prepare to die." He singled a young Macedonian out with his finger.

The youth stepped forward, drawing his double-edged dagger from its sheath, came opposite the girl, who made no attempt to escape her fate. She knew how to die. There was a sudden movement, a gleam, a groan, and the keen steel found her heart. With her hands she grasped the hilt of the dagger for a moment, then they fell apart and with a choking cry she lay prone.

The mother who up to this moment had been standing motionless sank slowly on her knees, staring at her daughter's dead face and at the blot of red which spread and widened on the girl's white



chemise. She fell across the body in a passionate burst of lamentation. . . .

"Oh, my little dove," she wailed, "they have robbed you from me. All your tender years you lay in my heart, and now you have gone and left my aged bosom empty. . . .

The peasants and comitaj stood silent, respecting the old woman's grief which at last died down to a faint and inarticulate moan.

From the distant fort, came the rattle of a beaten drum.

"The signal," murmured the peasants, looking one at the other.

Petko, who had been a mere spectator of all this, stepped up to Dimitri and whispered, pointing to the young Macedonian. Dimitri grinned and spoke to a peasant woman standing near. She nodded, and ran away, returning in a short while with a heap of clothes flung over one arm. Dimitri signalled to the young Macedonian.

"Put these on," he said gruffly, "and go to the fort in her place."

The Macedonian nodded with comprehension, stripped off his coat, tucked up his trousers, and hurried into the woman's skirt and head kerchief. He was slight and as yet moustacheless, and dressed in the woman's clothes, in the fading light made a very good imitation of Jula, the dead girl.

"Good," said Dimitri. "Go."

The boy went down the street with a revolver

in each hand and concealed in the folds of the skirt. Again the drum clattered out insistent.

"Drum away, my boy," muttered Petko, "you'll get a pretty mistress to-night, I think."

There was a tense stillness, broken by a sharp report, followed by a second. The boy with skirts



caught up to his waist came back running. He tore the woman's garments from him.

"Good," he cried, "I got him. The first didn't kill, but the second did," he pointed to his forehead. "I saw it hit. The fool came out to meet me. None of them had any guns; it was easy."

The mother looked up.

"I thank you, brother," she said, "our family is avenged."



CHAPTER XVI

GLIGOR SOKOLOVITCH

WITH the coming of the spring flowers—the Divle —which is the secret name for the comitaji and means wild men—mustered once more to continue their perennial struggle with the Mrsne—which are the Turks, so-called because they eat flesh on Wednesdays and Fridays when the decent folks eat it not—and Petko, emerging from his hibernation at Yamboul joined himself to a band under the leadership of the famous Voivoda, Gligor Sokolovitch. At that time he was the greatest scourge of the Turk in all Macedonia and—which suited the book of Petko and his two companions—no longer engaged in Bulgarian propaganda was gathering together a nest egg on which he might live his old age out in comfort—though but few of the Macedonian leaders ever grew to overripeness.

All through the spring and the summer they wandered from village to village and from monastery to monastery, meeting the Turks in battle providing they did not muster fifty men, avoiding the Turks if they exceeded that number. They would commandeer lambs from the farms, promising to pay

when possible, and good wheaten bread was supplied them free by the monasteries. Gligor, a man utterly fearless, was about six feet in stature, with dark, always angry, eyes and intensely white teeth—about which clung always the hint of a mocking smile—heavy black eyebrows and a large moustache. He had the talent of the born leader, that the more desperate grew the situation the calmer he became; none had ever seen him angry except about a trifle. Rumour and reports of this bandit and of that kept the little troop marching and countermarching, but the tales of crime, cruelty, and oppression mounted especially against one, an Albanian chief, his name Rejabeg. Village after village testified to the callous cruelty of the tiger or to that of his blood brothers, Hassan Mali and Petor Deli (mad Peter), an Albanian catholic.

"Ah! Gligor Sokolovitch," the peasants would cry out, "we were dancing on the church green. Novitza's slava here, and the boys and maidens were footing the Kola to the music of Svetor's pipes. Just in the evening there he was striding across the green, coming as if from nowhere, and his great belt full of pistols and stataghan a yard and a half long. He pushed his way in, joining hands and dancing with the rest, and though they were fainting with terror, needs must they keep both feet and pipes agoing. He, and his black beady devil's eyes in his evil face, tripping from one maiden to the next till all were sweating with fear

and their limbs so stiff that they could scarcely move. After half an hour of this hell he suddenly burst the ring and strode across to Maria—you remember her—poor Maria, and he says 'You come with me, girl.'"

The relater spread his hands with an expressive gesture.

"And there is no one who can stop this tiger. He eats us up. Where he will spring next the devil alone—who is his keeper—can tell. And nobody can kill him, he is immortal. Curse him, curse him and his 'pobratim'" (blood brothers).

"Quiet, quiet, brother," answered Gligor gently, half smiling. "His day is coming."

"Let it come, and I will believe," cried the old man. "Does God hate us, that He allows these wolves. . . ."

But for some while Rejabeg proved a very will-o'-the-wisp. Proof of his misdeeds they had in plenty, but he was not to be found despite careful search. One day news was suddenly brought that a body of fifty Turks was near by. Gligor turned to a Macedonian boy, who was a fleet runner.

"Go," he said, "find out. By God, if it were Rejabeg—but it is not."

The boy went cautiously. The maize was long in parts, and by creeping he came to within earshot of the camp. He could count the men, and he noted all the details of their armament. But

attempting to come yet closer, to learn what they were doing in such a place, he trod incautiously—a stick snapped beneath him. Instantly the soldiers sprang up. The boy, discovered, fled through the standing corn, but an open field stood clear across his path. Trusting to his speed, he sprang out across the fallow land. Forty rifles crashed. The boy, hit in the groin, fell, but he staggered to his feet. Another volley sang by him without doing him harm. Staggering, he returned to his post.

"Well?" asked Gligor of the panting youth.

"They are of no account," replied the boy, standing at attention. "It's not worth telling. There are fifty-two of them, and they can't kill one properly." This said, he fell prone. The comitaji gathered about him, and he was carried to a monastery where his wound was dressed.

As the summer progressed the contest between Gligor and Rejabeg became similar to that between the excisemen and Smuggler Bill; Rejabeg seemed almost as evanescent as the notorious defrauder. One afternoon, however, a young boy came panting to the encampment, he held a gasped conversation with the leader. The comitaji waited expectant; Gligor's eyes began to glitter, his teeth showed white in the well-known grin.

"Pack up, boys," he cried. "Quick."

"Rejabeg?" queried the men.

Gligor nodded.

"Which way?"

"Cherna Gora, by Uskub. He is in hiding with fourteen men. We have him."

Soon the packs were loaded, and they set off on the tramp. Gligor was grinning and chuckling as he strode the long road. They descended to the Vardar river, crossed it by swimming, dragging the packs over on a hastily constructed raft. Before them rose the heights of Cherna Gora (black mountains), and far away to the right they could see the minarets of Uskub, white like sword blades in the early sun. On the lower slopes of the mountain Gligor ordered a halt, and choosing out one of the younger men, he said—

"Go, find Rejabeg. Tell him that I am here with thirty men, but that I will take no advantage of him. I will meet him, fifteen to fifteen, when and where he will, and let the best man win."

The youth sped up the hill and soon was lost in the shrubbery. In the afternoon the boy returned.

"Rejabeg will meet you at six o'clock. There is a level space about two kilometres distant. He will fight one by one, and no one to interfere with any combat."

"Good," returned Gligor, and turning to the band: "Who goes with me?"

"I," answered the troop, stepping forward like one man.

"H'm," said Gligor, scanning the group. He chose rapidly. "Milan Markovitch [Petko], Yovan

Pechanatz, Dimitri Petrovitch. . . ." Soon the fifteen were ranged before him.

"It will be a good fight, boys," he said smiling.

"To the death," returned the chosen.

"You all stay here," went on Gligor, turning to the others. "No matter how it goes, you must do nothing if not attacked. You understand?"

The fifteen marched to the field of tourney, arriving almost simultaneously with the Turks, and the enemies greeted one another with shouts of defiance. Foremost of the enemy, and half a hand taller than the tallest, towered Rejabeg, a mighty man and a born fighter both with gun and sword. With either weapon it were difficult to find his master, but Gligor did not count on his skill alone. When Rejabeg saw the enemy he walked forward, turning his yataghan in fantastic spirals in the air, making curves and arabesques of glittering ribboned light.

"Come, Divle," he cried, "we fight one by one. Who is there amongst you that dares to meet Rejabeg?"

"I," returned Gligor, and he stepped forward to meet the Albanian. Smaller was he, and not so skilled, but fear had never yet entered his heart, and he counted on wit to make up what skill failed him. "I am coming, Rejabeg," he cried, "I come to give you a fencing lesson, and the fee is death."

"Ha! you think so?" retorted Rejabeg.

"I know," returned Gligor, "now face me and live. I have the soul of Marko and the arm of Milosh; to-night you will be like Murad, all split open for the Macedonian girls to laugh at."



Rejabeg was not quick with his tongue, he flushed with anger, his mouth trembled with rage.

"Have you said good-bye to your Bulla, your

favourite of the harem?" cried Gligor, in tones which rang over the field.

"Why?" cried Rejabeg.

"You cannot go back without your head,"



returned Gligor. "There would be no lips to kiss. That woman will cry her eyes out to-night, Rejabeg, her couch will be cold. But perhaps she doesn't love you and will be glad, and your place

will soon be taken by another; who knows, perhaps even now. . . ."

Rejabeg roared out a loathsome curse and bounded at his tormentor. His lightning stroke —but half parried by the Serb—hit deep into the triceps of the left arm, though Gligor, twisting suddenly, deceived the Turk, who thought the stroke had missed. Gligor, still chaffing—growing colder, more keen and detached as the other grew angry—fenced warily, hiding his wounded arm and presenting only his right side to the other's blows which he guarded off with the blade and hilt of his yataghan.

With keen eyes he watched every opening. Suddenly both swords flared and both swordsmen fell. A cry went up from either side. Gligor raised himself on his hands and knees, and sat on the chest of his opponent. The comitaji shouted for joy while the imperturbable leader drew out a tobacco box and rolled a calming cigarette. He seized his sword, and with a sudden sweep severed the brigand's head, which he held up by the "paradise lock" in the sight of the antagonists. The Turks howled with fury, and breaking the truce levelled their rifles. At the report Gligor fell. Petko, Yovan Pechanatz, and two cousins of the leader, sprang to his help. The Turks fired rapidly, but they came to their captain unhurt. He was lying flat and grinning. He shouted out—

"Lie flat, you——"

They sprawled immediately in the long grass, eagerly inquiring if he were hit. He laughed.

"Of course not, listen to those fool bullets, they are yards away."

The other ten came crawling through the grass.

"Shall we charge? Shall we charge?" they inquired eagerly.

"No," returned Gligor. "They are brave men. It would cost too dear, and we have the chief devil."

"They've hit," cried one of the comitaj rolling over with a broken leg.

"Well, don't make such a noise, they will think they've killed all of us," retorted the leader.

Another Serb crumpled up and sprawled, a dark spot on his forehead told its tale.

Dusk was coming rapidly down. The sun had already disappeared behind the heights of the Osogovska Planina, and after the sunset dark is not far lagging in those latitudes. With the dusk the Turks withdrew, and the wounded captain mustered his forces. Besides his men, five others of the band were touched. With the help of the others they made stretchers for the man with the broken leg, and for Gligor, the Albanian's last blow having caught him just above the kneecap inflicting a dangerous gash. The procession moved slowly down the side of the Cherna Gora, and took the path to the Monastery of Klisali, where a

welcome was sure and medical treatment was possible.

Life in the monastery was a welcome interlude for the comitaji after the trials and hard work of the summer. The men camped in the open courtyard behind the great fire-scarred gate. About the whole was a wall well built and of a sufficient strength which enclosed the small blue-towered church, the many-windowed monastery itself, and the barns and storehouses and cellars of the skirted, ringletted, pot-hatted monks. The Superior of the Monastery was a small round-bellied priest, in speech magnificently bellicose, preaching the most rabid revenge upon the Turks, and treating the comitaji—each of whom could have exterminated him by a sweep of the fist—with a faint gentle condescension. The sick room in the monastery was a long, low, white room, with small windows near the floor, and here Gligor slowly recovered his strength in spite of the primitive methods of hygiene practised. The other wounded man, however, lacking the necessary stamina, had succumbed and died from sepsis four days after his admission. There were two approved methods of treating wounds, the most popular partly herbal, for large flat dark green leaves smeared with fat were placed over the broken flesh, but as, however, no precautions were taken to clean either leaves or fat, it is surprising that the consequences were not more often disastrous; the



other method—anticipating our modern alcoholic treatment—prescribed two glasses of rakia—one for internal application, and one for external, but this treatment often went wrong, for the patient would divert the second dose after the first, and the microbes would flourish undismayed.

The autumn crept slowly in on the hills, the trees were now more like gigantic flowers, some were as gushing flames. The birches had lost their leaves, but not the tender twigs, and seemed almost as delicate as great russet dandelion heads on the hillsides; on the roads the mud deepened, and the peasantry discarded their shoes, carrying them for miles in their hands, to be worn only in the villages or houses.

Petko, as secretary to Gligor, was second in command of the band, but little was there to do while the leader lay recovering from his hurts; however he received reports and tabulated them, discussing day by day on which ride should their first venture be. The Turks had become very strict with the comitaji, and determining to rid themselves of this scourge, were very active—bands of soldiers were scouring the country.

"That Bey near Doiran, we will get him as soon as I am well," said Gligor. "He's as rich as a Jew, and he has been extorting it for years. It will serve him right, eh, Milan."

"Certainly," answered Petko.

"Tell the boys to get their arms polished up,



and their yataghans sharpened. My wound will be better now in a few days, and we will get off."

They set out, Gligor riding, for his knee was still weak. Two roads open to them, that by the valley of the Vardar, or that striding the mountains by Shtip and Strumitsa, they choose the latter for it lay more deserted, while the river route was heavy in traffic, and publicity was a thing uncourted by the comitaj. The winter had now set in, the trees were bareing before the cold winds, leaves lay thick in the forests and deadened the footsteps. In three days' march they came to the edge of the lake of Doiran, and set a camp in a large wood.

They had made their last stage by night, not wishing to attract the Turks' attention, and all day they waited in the wood. In the afternoon they saw a lonely figure who came along slowly, but straight towards them. It was a child of fifteen, a girl intent upon a pair of socks. Her knitting needles flickered in the winter sun. As she came closer she looked up for a second, and spying one of the sentries came towards him.

"Where is Gligor?" she asked.

The sentry pointed.

"I must see him at once."

She entered the wood. "Gligor, Gligor," she cried.

One could then see that under her mask of indifference she was violently excited. She led



the chief aside and talked rapidly. Her hands pointed now north, now south, now west. Gligor nodded, his lips twisted in a smile. The girl ceased. Gligor patted her shoulder.

"Rasumete, Rasumete," cried the child.

Gligor nodded. The child turned and ran out of the wood. When she reached the open, her steps slowed, and once more she was the loitering, indifferent knitter intent on her sock.

Gligor turned to the men.

"She says that five hundred Turks are after us. Somebody has betrayed us, and they know where we are. They have divided into three parties, west, north, and east. Let us hold a council."

The comitaji gathered round him, and they sat on the grass.

"This is the situation," said Gligor. "They are coming in three directions, here, here and here. There are no Turks this way. In death we are all brothers. If any one has a suggestion let him make it."

Blazo spoke. "If there is a road open, Gligor," he said, "it would be foolish not to take it."

"If a road is *left* open, Blazo," replied Gligor, "it would be foolish to take it, since it has been left for that purpose."

There was a silence. At last another spoke.

"There is a good hill over yonder. We can reach the summit, and we can fortify against these cursed Mrsne."



"Till we die of thirst and starvation, Yovancha," said Gligor. "I would sooner die fighting."

Silence fell again.

"You have a plan, Gligor," said Petko. "You are our leader. You have more experience than us all. Why waste time?"

"No hurry," said the leader, glancing at the sky; "we will do nothing till nightfall. Here is my scheme. We will divide into three parties, and each will go against the Turks through the woods. They will not expect us, for they mean us to run away through that opening, which is a trap of some sort—also they do not know that we know that they are here. We will attack simultaneously, and each party will imagine that the whole force is facing them. They will halt, waiting for the others to come up in the rear. Six of us will not fight, but will go as scouts. Somewhere there will be a weak spot, and when we have found that the scouts will concentrate us all, and we will break through if we can. I will take the northern party, Milan (Petko) the eastern, and Georgo, my cousin, the western."

The plan was acclaimed with cheers, and dividing his men into three parties, Gligor headed to the north.

Petko took his band two miles to the east, and hid them in open order among the trees and shrubs.

"Shoot quickly," he said, "so that they get

the idea of lots of men. Petar and Mitzko go back and forwards till we have found some weak spot."

The dusk came down, and in the shrubs the comitaji waited. Petko, scouting ahead in the night, at last heard the clatter of accoutrements and the hoarse commands in Turkish of the approaching troops. As he retreated he could now hear them floundering towards him through the thick shrubbery.

"Fire," he cried.

A rapid volleying sprang out; flashes spurted from the bushes. The Turks halted, astonished to find the enemy in such an unexpected place. The comitaji kept up a rapid fire, to which the Turks presently answered, but, as Gligor had calculated, making no attempt to advance on their enemy. A whisper ran through the bushes.

"Milan! Milan! Where is Milan?"

One of the runners came hurriedly.

"Blazo says that there are very few Turks against him on the left."

"Good," returned Petko. "You find Gligor, and get Mitzko to bring up Georgo—unless they have a better opportunity. We will stay here till you get back."

The runner disappeared in the night.

The firing died down to occasional and independent shots; the Turks satisfied if only they halted their opponents, and the comitaji waiting



till their comrades should come to them. In the night Petko felt a hand on his arm.

"Milan!" said a voice.

"Gligor," replied Petko.

"Petar found us; we are there, to the left. The Turks were fairly strong against us, but they are waiting over there, they think we are still over against them. Has Georgo come?"

"Not yet."

Soon the crackling of the undergrowth announced Georgo's arrival.

"Turks too strong against me, but they are waiting for the others to come. Oh, we have fooled them properly."

"Concentrate on the left there—yataghans and kammas. Creep as close as you can. Then go like hell and all the devils."

The comitaji slowly concentrated, making as little noise as possible. From the Turkish lines occasional shots disturbed the stillness. Suddenly a horrible yell broke out.

"Forward, comitaji."

The veterans bounded forward. Sudden dim figures rose in the bushes, firing wildly—then the two bands met. Petko, firing with revolver and stabbing with the kamma (double-edged knife), sprang amongst the Turks, behind him his men, howling like fiends, followed. Sudden cries of agony—the clash of crossed steel—shots—curses—and the band was through. The Turks on

either hand were some minutes before they were able to concentrate, learn what had happened, and organize a pursuit, but the comitaji, racing like young deers, could soon hear the trampling and crashing of the following troops. At the top of a hill Gligor mustered his men for a moment, seven only were missing.

"If we do not shake them off by dawn we must split up," he said. "They cannot follow us then, and we can go faster." And once more the band continued its racing descent of the hill.

The Turks coming over the brow fired at them as they descended the further side, but without inflicting loss or injury. As the dawn approached the pursuers still held the track, so the comitaji separated, flying in different directions like the spokes of a wheel. Petko and five others plunged straight towards Mustapha Pasha. Some of the Turks clung to their tracks, and they could get no rest; all through the day they went on, with dragging feet, consoled only by the thought that the Turks were as tired as they; on the second night, taking a sudden bend, they at length managed to evade pursuit. For thirty-six hours they had nothing to eat, but in spite of their hunger they snatched a few moments of repose before the dawn. When it was day Petko stole out to search for food, but almost immediately discovered the Turkish soldiery and was forced to creep back to his hiding place. They slept in



turns while by turns one, almost fainting over his rifle, stood on guard. In the night time they continued their road, stealing a lamb for food of which they gorged the half-roasted flesh. In three nights they had reached the Vilayet of Adrianople, but even here there was no repose. The Turks had determined to finish once and for ever with the comitaj. Soldiery was everywhere. It was almost impossible to enter a village to get food, the monasteries were guarded and spied upon. The unfortunate men were chased from one hiding place to another, the cowed villagers dared not give shelter. Winter had now set in, and bitter cold with occasional snowstorms added to their miseries. At last Petko determined to return to Bulgaria, for all hope of rejoining Sokolovitch that year seemed to be lost; but to live in Bulgaria he would need money. He called the five together in council.

"It is impossible to go on, brothers," he said.

The hollow-cheeked men nodded assent.

"I will go into the towns alone and spy out if there is not some place we can rob, for we cannot go back to Bulgaria without money. You wait for me here. When I have found some spot I will come back, and then we shall get out of this cursed country."

"Good," agreed his companions. "You know best, Milan."

He entered the small village of Beshtepe in the

evening, walking cautiously its lonely streets; the houses were poor though protected by high walls so that the whole village had a strange eyeless look. Petko progressed down the road, seeing no house which offered an inducement or temptation to the robber. He felt strangely weak, the continuous strain of being "fox" to another's "hounds" and under-nourishment had told on him.

Exhausted he at last sank on to a doorstep, the earth seemed to rock before his swimming eyes, and he fainted. When he recovered a man was bending over him; the stranger was dressed in the costume of a merchant, and he was speaking in a tongue which Petko knew to be Greek; but did not understand clearly.

"Govaresh Srbski?" asked Petko weakly.

"Dobra, Dobra," returned the Greek, and continuing in Serb: "But who are you? Why do I find you in a faint upon my doorstep?"

Petko stared at the man; something in his face invited confidence.

"I am a comitaj," returned Petko, "we have been hunted by the Turks night and day for ten days, brother. I suppose I am weak from want of food."

"Come in," returned the Greek, opening the gate of his garden. He urged the unsteady man within and closed the great door. Within the walls the garden was damp, and filled already with

leafless shrubs; the windows of the house, however, glowed a welcome.

"Come in, come in!" said the hospitable man, cheerily.

Petko stumbled into the room, and fell on to a chair.

"Wife, wife," cried the Greek, "bring food! Here's a poor stranger, starving."

Two small children, a boy and a girl, the latter dressed in the flowered pantaloons of the prophet's countrymen, stared at the newcomer. A fat woman, with shining face, also dressed in trousers, bustled about bringing forward bread, and cheese, bacon and wine.

"You are very good to a mere stranger," said Petko, listlessly. The fever was buzzing in his head like a hive of blue-bottles. "That's wine," he muttered, pointing to the bottle. "Wine," he reiterated to the two children.

"Wine," repeated the little girl solemnly.

The fever was gaining the upper hand again.

"Drink this," cried the host, pouring out a full tumbler of the dark fluid. Petko did not move.

"God! he has fainted once more," ejaculated the Greek. Without more ado Petko was put to bed, and remembered nothing during three days while he tossed, ever running, running from some invisible enemy. On the third day reason came once more. He weakly inquired—remembering

nothing—where he was and how he had come into the Greek's house.

"Three days," he repeated with a puzzled air. "Three days. But, my God, my comrades." He clutched the Greek's arm. "I left them out there. I was coming back. Three days?"

"I'll send the girl," said the Greek.

But after a while the girl returned. She had searched the district without discovering any trace of the other five men. All she was certain of was that no comitaji had been arrested in that district within the week.

For fifteen days Petko remained in shelter; being but little better, his benefactor agreed to keep him till his strength should have somewhat increased, and for twenty-five days longer Petko remained with the generous family. A furious snowstorm broke over the country, burying all a foot deep with a dry powdery white dust. The Greek one morning came with a long face.

"I can keep you no longer, Milan Markovitch," he said. "There are tales, and somehow it has leaked out that I have a stranger in my house. I shall be searched in a few days, so I have arranged that you go to the house of a Bulgar, who will eventually arrange to get you over to Bulgaria."

Petko thanked him warmly. "But thanks can never repay what you have done for me," he concluded. "You have given me a life. God will



repay it to you in some manner, I hope. Though I confess that He has strange ways of behaving."

"All I ask," returned the Greek, "is that if you are caught, do not betray me."

"I will be cut into small pieces first," said Petko.

The Bulgar received him kindly, and here he remained for four days. The illness had left him listless, and he would sit in a corner moody, and meditating over his life, and what a useless and futile thing it seemed. One evening he was sitting alone, the Bulgar was out, and the women of the house in the back premises, the stove was warm and Petko was sleepy. He had just cleaned his rifle, and was reloading it lazily when three thunderous knocks sounded on the door.

"Comitaj!" cried a voice in Turkish. "Te slim pooska" (give up your gun).

Petko started up. Again he had been sold. He grasped his rifle and stole to the door, listening, he could ascertain that the venturesome gendarme had withdrawn, and he calculated that they would be waiting by the corner of the house. He flung open the door, and issuing, rapidly fired three shots, then he darted down the steps and across the small garden. The police fired, a blow on the back rolled him over, but he regained his feet and ran on.

"They can kill me," he thought, "I don't care; it will make no difference."

He knew he was wounded, but could not determine where. He ran steadily until his steps were unsteady. The road seemed to grow more uneven, the snow seemed to clog the feet. . . . Suddenly he rolled over, turning a somersault. He lay quite still, a dark patch on the whiteness of the snow.

The police, following the bloodstained track, found him spread out, but, having experienced comitaji before, they would not take his faint for genuine without proof, but with the aid of a knife which they brutally stuck into various parts were soon convinced. The wounded man was bound up, cleverly enough, laid on a sledge, and patient oxen dragged him unconscious to Mustapha Pasha, where he was put into the hospital.



CHAPTER XVII

A TURKISH CAPTIVE

Down the dreary paths towards the little, then Turkish, port of Dedeagatch, a small party was making its way. It consisted of four men; three were horsemen, befezzed and riding high perched on the towering Turkish saddles. The fourth was a foot passenger who walked in the triangle made by the three horses. As the little procession came slowly down the hillside, one could see how weary was this solitary pedestrian. The Turks rode with rifles on hip, swinging slowly to the motion of the horses. But the other dragged his feet in the snow, his head, gaunt-faced and pallid, hung forward. Sometimes he stumbled as though he would fall, his arms did not swing, for they were handcuffed across his chest, and were purple and frost-bitten with the cold. The group wound round about the narrow and ill-paved streets of the town, halting at last before the gaol whose doors opened to receive them.

Petko Moritch, for the prisoner was he, was passed through the warders' room, and pushed into a cell, a bare room with a rocky floor, and in the

centre a small brazier over which crouched a lean and haggard Turk. His handcuffs were removed, and in their place was substituted a heavy iron collar chain, and to his feet, fetters weighing in all some eighty to a hundred pounds. For a while he crouched over the wretched brazier trying to bring back some circulation to his frozen hands, regardless of the danger of frostbite. For nearly a month now he had been in the hands of the Turks, his clothes were a matted mass of lice and vermin, and the bread which was his only food, turned his stomach. However, in spite of the sickness produced, he gnawed a morsel to ease the pain of his hunger. There were no beds on the hard, rocky floor, and Petko propped himself miserably in a corner, shutting his eyes, and endeavouring to sleep. The irons dragged him down insistently, and if sleep did but come for a moment, the weight would pull at his slackened muscles and disturbing his balance, would waken him.

He could not lie down, for from long lying on the rock floors, his poor body was covered with great sores. So he, the long night, hovered between sleep and wakefulness in a condition which rested neither body nor senses. And then the next day the long tramp at the horses' tails mounting the hills to Gumogina. His weary feet dragged on, pushing the snow-spotted ground away beneath them, his mind, sometimes merely dazed, was at other times active like a beetle on a pin, thoughts whirling



round and round and round in his heated brain though no conclusion ever emerged. The wounds in neck and arm which he had received the night of his capture were almost healed, though they still pained him and were stiff. Fifteen days had he lain in the hospital at Mustapha Pasha, protesting vigorously that he was no comitaj. The Turks had pointed out that he was possessed of weapons and that he had resisted capture, but Petko replied that he was a deserter from the Bulgarian army, and that he had thought the police Bulgarians, who were using Turkish as a ruse to recapture him. The Turks did not believe the yarn, for the Bulgarian traitor had told them what he knew, which was not much, but they were not sure whether he were really comitaj or whether he were schoolmaster—the latter the greater crime—and so sent him to Constantinople with his wounds half healed. Tramp, tramp, tramp, over the mountains. He had entered Constantinople by the Yedina gate, where a huge rib, supposed to have been that of the hero Kralievitch Marko—Deli Marko—Mad Marko, the Turks called him, had stuck in the memory. Often as he stumbled along, behind those cursed horses, he would recall that rib, and an enormous mace which hung near by, he thought that the man who had carried either would be as big as an ox, could men be big as oxen? Could oxen be big as men? No, that was not it—could? The Turks were lying —everyone was a liar, everyone was a thief—

nobody even was honest, not all his life—tramp, tramp, tramp. At Constantinople he had stuck to his lies—what long white beards the men had in Constantinople, there seemed to be no young men, all long beards; he had been condemned to exile, there were no proofs of his scholarship, nor of his depredations. He was to be exiled, but first he was to go round the towns of Turkey to see if he



could not be identified. Well, here he was. From Constantinople to Tacrida, from Tacrida to Soffola, from Soffola to Demotica, from Demotica to Dedeagatch, from Dedeagatch to—would they never come to Gumogina . . . and then on, on like the wandering Jew, no rest by day, less by night. The Turks had not been actively cruel to him, he admitted to himself, less cruel than his people would have been to a Turk so situated. . . .



Gumogina at last—warmth at least. In the small square gaol were two prisoners, one a youngish Albanian, the other an old Turk. They crowded together over the small brazier, eating up all the heat. This evening Petko was ironed only, the road had been bitterly cold, and in his eagerness to warm his hands he jostled the elder Turk with his elbow.

"Cursed slave, take that," cried the old man. He struck Petko over the head with the long tongs used for the charcoal. Petko's temper flamed out, for a moment murder was in his soul. He seized the long flexible tongs from the old man, and gripping him by the collar of his waistcoat he flogged him. The old man's cries echoed in the prison.

"Drop him, you damned christian," shouted the younger man, springing across the fire. Petko, nothing loath, deserted the first to meet the second adversary. Soon the young man's cries were raised in chorus with those of the elder. The police springing up from their supper, burst into the cell. They overpowered the fighting Serb, and bound him with ropes.

"What is all this damned noise?" they cried.

"The cursed giaour had no sooner come within the doors, but he jumped upon us true believers," whimpered the old man.

"He lies," retorted Petko, "he struck me with the tongs. I but retaliated."



"Would you take the word of an infidel?" screamed the greybeard.

The guards dragged Petko out of the prison.

"We'll teach you to beat a true believer," they cried. In a field without the gaol they tied him up to a tree.

"You would beat true Turks," they shouted, "you cursed infidel." Smash came the first musket butt against his back. Petko set his teeth, bash came another—not a cry should they wring from him, he wished they would kill him and finish with it. The heavy blows rained down on him, he felt a rib break, like the stab of a sharp dagger; one man pointed his rifle and drove the muzzle between the shoulder blade and the backbone—to this day Petko thinks he will eventually die of that coward's blow. Still the blows fell without pity, smashing in more ribs, till at last he fainted.

"Curse it, I believe he is dead," said one of the Turks as they unbound him.

"Ha! ha! you don't kill a Serb as easy as that," returned another, "or they would long ago have been obliterated."

Like a sack of insentient matter they dragged Petko back to the gaol and flung him on to the rocky floor; the two Turkish prisoners wreaked their vengeance by kicking the inanimate man.

For five days he was allowed to lie in pain, three ribs were broken and stuck at all angles, and



the pain of the stab in the back was an intolerable and never ceasing torment. No doctor was brought to him, and on the fifth day he was dragged to his feet and commanded to march. And the weary route began again; but with three broken ribs, an injured clavicle, and continual starvation—for the Turkish Ramazan had set in—and no food was he allowed till the sun had gone down. Owing to their starvation, too, the guards became very bad tempered, and they cursed his dragging footsteps from Gumogina to Zelovo, from Zelovo to Stari-Shaban, from Stari-Shaban to Kavalla, from Kavalla to Drama.

At Stari-Shaban a curious incident befell him, in order to explain which, we must go back to 1889—eight long years before.

A few nights before Petko had struck Zhivko the speaker, the unfortunate blow which was responsible for all his adventures, he had dreamed a dream. It was a dream in serial, if one might say so, he awoke three or four times during its course, but on falling again asleep continued as though no interruption had occurred. It was a wild dream, like a "penny dreadful," of robberies, and flights, and murders, and prisons, and not many incidents had remained clear to his mind. But one picture had stood out quite prominent. That of the interior of a bare gaol with a rocky floor and dirty walls of stained white. In the centre was a brazier about which six men were



sitting, one was in Albanian costume, and of one the head was covered with large warts which showed through scanty grey hair; there was a shelf upon the far wall on which were seven grey-blue cups inverted and separated, each by a loaf of bread; he could remember the bread loaf by loaf, this was brown; this only pale dun; this one was blistered and showed the half-baked interior through the broken blisters, and that one was upside down. He had seen this all clearly, had remembered, and stepping into Stari-Shaban gaol he retreated with a cry of amazement. Here was the very gaol he had seen in dream eight long years before. The same men, the same grey-blue cups, and the loaves each exact in colour and shape. At his cry the warty-headed man looked up, and for the first time Petko saw his face, that, too, he had seen in his dream.

"What is it?" asked warty-head.

"I—I don't know," stammered Petko, "only I have seen all this . . . all this sometime . . . in a dream."

"Oh, go in and stop talking," snarled the gaoler, giving him a push on the back. The hand fell on the bruised shoulder blade, and the pain was so intense that for some moments Petko could not speak. . . .

Though Petko Moritch himself confesses that he can expect few to believe in the truth of this it naturally impressed him profoundly. Through the



long route which followed Stari-Shaban he meditated over this strange phenomenon. In his younger days Petko had often dreamed, and authentic stories are told of his having thus predicted events which subsequently came to pass, but after this great dream, almost simultaneous with his acceptance of the wild life, the dreams had entirely ceased. He wondered on that weary road, if this so long delayed fulfilment of that last dream had some deep significance; whether, for instance, it predicted his coming death? If so he felt no fear, only an intense weariness, and to have done with all this pain and torture would seem rather a relief than a robbery. His broken ribs had more or less settled, but the cruel stab in the back was insistent with every breath. . . . his sickness increased with each mouthful of the nauseating bread which alone sustained his life. . . .

From Drama the road mounted over a high pass towards Seres, the country became more desolate, here and there thin patches of grass showed among the snow. The long uphill pull was an extra strain on the debilitated prisoner, whom the Turks, riding easily on their sturdy horses, cursed almost without intermission. Not a house was to be seen, the rocky road wound and zigzagged into great rolling banks of mist which were filled with fine driving snow.

"Come on, you cursed skeleton of a Serb, we shall never reach the 'Hahn,'" yelled the police.

Petko glared at them with bloodshot eyes. How he longed for ten minutes with a revolver in his hand—he had by now abandoned all hope of leaving Turkey alive—but he would have died in fight if he could.

The crest of the mountain was passed late in the afternoon, and afterwards the "Hahn" appeared. It was a rough wood-roofed shed of ill made stone walls. Within there was no separation of man from beast, the floor of the barn was deep with manure, and the smell was that of a long uncleaned stable, horses were tethered, their haunches gleaming in the dim light of the single candle; just behind them a long shelf made a sleeping bench for the traveller, and raised him above the midden, and at one end over a small fireplace some miserable meal was stewing in a slung pot: through the smell of the stable came that odour which indicates the presence of "bugs" by the million. A few men, their fierce faces swathed in scarves till they seemed incarnations of the Saracen heroes, were lounging near the fireplace sipping strong sweet coffee—made with the grounds—so thick that a spoon would almost stand upright, and talking in fast undertones, one or two men were curled up on the benches already asleep.

The entry of Petko and his guards made a sudden stir, horses were pushed aside to make room for the newcomers, fresh coffee was brewed,



and the police, as though repenting of their harshness of the daytime, offered cups of the stimulant to Petko, pressing tobacco also on him. Petko accepted gratefully, and, delighted for once to have a bed less hard and cold than the rock, turned to rest his weary bones on the long wooden sleeping bench. One of the guards had a fine white horse of which he was very proud, and the animal, choosing a moment when his master was outside, suddenly lay down and rolled in the accumulated muck of the stable-inn. It rose a filthy sight. The soldiers roared with laughter.

"Eh," they cried, "you wait till Ali comes back."

The owner, returning, fell into a furious temper.

"Ah," he screamed. "Moskor Padisha, Moskor Padisha. Dirty Russian Czar."

He kicked the horse brutally. The horse lashed out, causing the man to jump suddenly back. Petko laughed. The man turned angrily on the prisoner.

"You laugh," he cried.

Petko did not reply.

"Answer me, you pig of a Serb," roared the man. "Why the hell did you laugh?"

Petko said no word.

The man jumped on to the sleeping-bench, and standing over the prisoner repeated his question. His tone was more threatening. Petko thought, "If I make him angry enough he will kill me, and

I will be rid of all this misery." He remained obstinately silent. The leader with a rope tied the prisoner's ankles so tight that they seemed to be cut through.

"Answer me, you dog," he screamed.

Petko preserved a stubborn silence.

The Turk sprang again on to the bench, and lifting his heavy boot aimed a vicious kick at the recumbent Serbian. Petko, divining his act, rolled suddenly over so that the kicking leg flew into the air, and the Turk staggered in an undignified manner to retain his balance.

He swore, calling down a thousand maledictions on to Petko's family. Petko thought, "Now I can madden him." He retorted in kind, letting the whole of his long accumulated hate and despair find vent in biting words. The Turk's face grew dark red. He pulled out his revolver and thrust it between the prisoner's jaws; the sharp foresight scarred the tender roof of the mouth. Petko was still trying to curse. The other police sprang forward and dragged the angry Turk away.

"You cursed fool," they cried. "Do you want to get a year's gaol because of a Serb? Leave him alone, what has he done to you?"

The leader retired sullenly and sat by the fire, his anger slowly oozing out of him. Presently he returned and stood over the captive.

"Serb," he said, "you have courage."

He seized a dish of "pilaf" and ladled out a



generous helping. He added to it two eggs and brought it to Petko's side.

"Eat," he said. "I was wrong."

He brought a cup of strong coffee.

"Drink, Serb," he said.

Petko looked with longing at the meats; but his pride was hot in him.

"Do you think I want your damned food?" he said bitterly. "Why can't you kill me and have done?"

And he turned away, trying to forget his miseries in sleep. The next day began the descent of the mountain to Seres. For two days he rested in Seres, and on the third day came to Salonica. At that time the great hotels on the quays were still unbuilt. The town was a ramshackle collection of Turkish houses, many built from the stones of the old walls which still stand useless and deserted on the hills behind the town. The dirt was indescribable, the streets were unpaved and uncleaned; heaps of rotting rubbish stood about, breeding flies and disease. The dogs—sole scavengers of the town—slunk about like timid hyenas. Petko was marched through the town to the gaol where he was locked up.

The next morning he was taken before the Mudir of Police. In his hand the official had a letter from Constantinople, written to the Vali. He was reading as Petko was brought in. He looked up.

"This is the prisoner?" he asked.

"Yes, Mudir," answered the gaoler.

"I have a letter from Constantinople," said the Mudir. "You are a dangerous comitaj, and you are to be transported."

"I am not a comitaj," answered Petko, through an interpreter, a policeman of Serbian extraction but Turkish religion from Bosnia.

"You will be taken to Uskub and thence to Berane and Andrievitza, where you will be handed over to the Montenegrin authorities," went on the Mudir through the Bosnian.

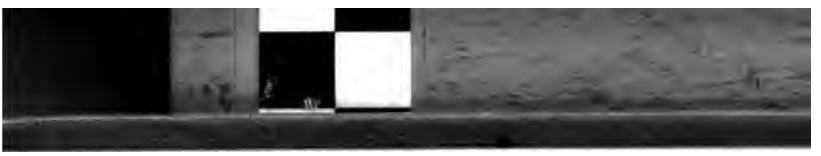
Petko in imagination pictured the long and weary route up the Vardar, to Pristina, Ipek. . . . He knew that long ere he came to the Montenegrin frontier he would be dead. Already he could scarcely stand, his legs were so weak that they were trembling beneath him.

"Tell the Mudir that I cannot walk any more," said Petko. The police clerk listened with impassive face.

"Mudir says you must walk," replied the interpreter. "No outlaw can have either horse or cart. Even if you gave money for them you could not have them."

"Then," retorted Petko, "I will die here. What does it matter to me if I expire in Salonica or three or four miles away? Tell the Mudir I will not walk."

"Mudir says then you get no food."



"Good, that will hasten the end."

He was marched back to his gaol.

"You are a cursed obstinate man," said the gaoler. "You'd better go. It will be the worse for you."

For two days he was left in peace, if it can be called peace when one is so sore that sleep is practically impossible and vermin so thick that one's clothes are a mottled mass of living horror: but food was supplied.

The third day the gaoler came again.

"You get up and walk," he said gruffly.

"Tell the Mudir I cannot walk," returned Petko. "If I am going to die I will die here."

"Then you will get no food," snarled the gaoler.

"Food or none, I cannot walk," reiterated Petko.

"You can walk if you wish, it's your cursed obstinacy," retorted the gaoler going from the cell.

During two more days he lay starving, on the next day, the gaol being full, a small Jewish merchant, arrested for petty larceny, was thrust in on him. The Jew stared for a while at the emaciated figure of his fellow prisoner, gaunt-faced, eyes staring.

"By Moses," said the Jew, "what have they done to you?"

"They are starving me to death because I

cannot walk," answered Petko, his voice was a hollow hoarse croak, "for two days I have had nothing to eat."

The Jew made ejaculations of pity.

"I have not much," he returned, "but I get it from my friends outside. If I can spare any I will give you some."

"I do not think it any good," returned Petko. "They mean me to die here. I may die soon as well as late."

However, when the Jew offered him a small piece of bread as large as a match box, and a handful of roasted pumpkin seeds, the craving of his stomach overruled his desires. He could not starve himself to death. Each day the Jew spared him from his over-slender stock, the small piece of bread and the handful of seeds and for nine ghastly days Petko survived. He could grow no thinner for already his bones were almost piercing his tight stretched skin, yet from the reserves of his great strength, the feeble life was still able to maintain its residence in the tortured body. On the ninth day a huge Greek was thrust into the cell. Petko's eyes fixed immediately the coloured handle of a knife which was in his belt and which the warders had not taken from him. Petko tried to talk to him, but the Greek knew no Turkish and Petko had no Greek. With signs he tried to indicate that he was a Christian, but the giant was a great fool, and for five or six



hours, while the Jew was sleeping, Petko tried to induce the Greek to give up his knife. First, he wished to kill the gaoler, and afterwards himself. He felt like a tiger who smells a victim. But the Greek either would or could not understand. He only realized that Petko wished to have the knife and this he determined was not to happen.

The Greek being too big to force, even had Petko been in full strength, he waited till the monster lay back and slept; then very cautiously he crept across the gaol. He came close, watching to determine whether he were really asleep. Very cautiously Petko opened the man's coat, but the Greek's huge hand came swiftly over and gripped his wrist, with a curse flinging Petko from him; and all night long the two lay awake glowering each at other. In the early morning warders came and led the Greek to another cell.

On the night of the twelfth day cramp seized the unfortunate man, wringing torturing cramp running over his body and knotting muscle after muscle with intolerable agony. He rolled on the floor howling with the pain. The Jew, terrified, hammered on the door and called without ceasing for the warders.

The gaoler appeared for a moment, stared down at the writhing man.

"Take him away, take him away," implored the Jew. "He is dying—take him to hospital."

"It's his own fault," said the gaoler in a bad tempered voice. "He won't go, so of course he gets no food."

"But take him to the hospital."

The gaoler only cursed in answer, slamming the door.

The Jew continued to call out and to hammer on the door and at midday two doctors, in Turkish uniform, came into the cell. The Jew ran to them.

"Take him away," he cried, "he gives me the terrors. He is a dying man, put him in the hospital, for God's sake!"

But Petko's cramp had passed off, he was now lying pallid and exhausted, though no longer in agony. The doctor stooped over him and felt the pulse.

"Ich bischa yock," he said, meaning that nothing was amiss.

"But he almost died in the night, I saw it," retorted the Jew.

"There is nothing amiss," retorted the doctor, turning on his heel. The next day Petko was ordered to the officers' room. It was a large white room with big windows and a stove. Eleven officers were waiting and two doctors, they stood passive and with the solid calm of the oriental. One of the doctors examined the poor man, in a careless nonchalant manner.

"He is all right," he said, "he can walk."



Petko turned on him.

"Are you a doctor?" he cried. "Cannot you see that I am two stages from death; cannot you see that all my muscles have run to water? Doctor, no doctor you—a donkey, that is what you are," and he swore.

"This man is perfectly fit," said the doctor.

The officers looked one at the other.

"Perfectly fit," said one, and each repeated, "Perfectly fit, perfectly fit." He was taken back to gaol.

Half an hour later the gaoler came into the cell accompanied by a huge "pomak" (Bulgar of Turkish religion).

"Well, what now?" said Petko wearily.

The pomak cleared his throat.

"Montenegrin, you will go," he said.

"With what?" asked Petko.

"With your feet," returned the other.

"I will not," replied Petko.

"You will," retorted the other and cursed.

Petko returned curse for curse.

The gaoler grinned. "You will die here like a dog," he cried.

"Let me die in peace then," retorted Petko, "the sight of you makes the agony ten times as great."

The pomak stretched out a huge hand and gripped the collar of Petko's coat: he lifted the unfortunate prisoner and swinging him like

a half-drowned puppy carried him out of the cell.

"Walk," he commanded.

"No."

"Walk, curse you."

"No."

He dragged the wretched man along the corridor, and out of the gaol, across a road and into a large yard which was surrounded on three sides by a high barrack building. Four mounted policemen were waiting for him and one foot gendarme. The pomak swung him into their midst and stood him on his feet, swaying. Petko remained erect but obstinate: they could kill him, that was all.

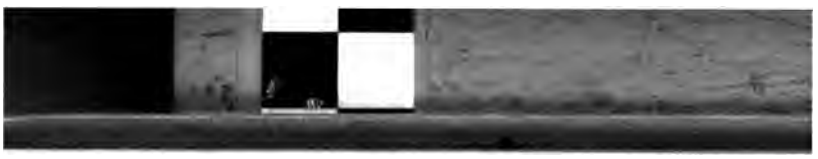
The sergeant, to show his power, stared at the prisoner and with his eyes made signs to go. Petko met his stare for stare, and as plainly his eyes said "No."

"Go," thundered the sergeant.

"I will not," returned Petko.

The guards looked astounded at the intrepidity of this man, and for a while they consulted what means would induce him to go. Several soldiers were lounging curiously about and two or three joined the conference. One, an Ethiopian black as night, a sergeant-major, was carrying a Russian "knout," four-thonged and tipped with leaden weights, came forward.

"What is the matter?" he asked.



"This Montenegrin has been ordered to go and he will not," replied the policeman.

"Why don't you make him?" queried the sergeant-major.

"That is a question. We have tried. He won't go."

"Oh, you don't know anything. Here, I'll show you."

The man drew the thongs of the knout through his fingers.

"Go," he thundered to Petko.

Petko grinned at him.

"You will make me, I suppose," he sneered.

"I will," replied the other.

"Bah," retorted the prisoner. "If I won't go for those fellows, do you think I'd go for four feet nothing of black dirt?" All the while he was praying that the man would kill him. The Ethiopian lifted the knout and struck, the leather thongs curled round Petko's head, and the leather weights impinged on the jaw. Petko, with a supreme effort, raised his arms and brought the pointed rivet of his shackles full on to the black man's temple, knocking him back, but so weak was he that he did not cut the scalp. The pomak, yelling a curse, struck Petko on the forehead with the butt of his rifle, opening the skin across the head. Petko fell on to the ground, but he screamed curses at the Bulgar, hoping to taunt him into giving a fatal blow: but the Serbian's courage had the opposite

result. The pomak dropped his rifle: he turned white, and staggered back against the wall. "Gunack," he cried, "Gunack," which means "sin."

Petko lay panting, the wound in his head showed a red gash, but so bloodless was he that none ran from the cut. The Turks gathered round, and some said—

"Anyone can see that that fellow cannot walk, he is already half a dead man."

From an upstairs window a huge bearded head was thrust out.

"What's all this noise about?" cried a stentorian voice. Sharp eyes took in the scene, the man lying half-stunned, the group of soldiers and police.

"What are you doing?" cried the voice again. "Eating the Sultan's bread, and taking the Sultan's pay, to kill men here?" The head was withdrawn and a moment later a huge Turkish officer strode from the barrack door. He came magnificently up to the group.

"What is all this about?" he asked. "Why is this man lying here?"

"He is a Montenegrin," replied the soldiers, "he was ordered to march to Uskub but said he was unable. Hassan then struck him with a knout, so he hit Hassan with his fetters, then Pomak flogged him with his rifle butt. But he has courage, he swore at the Pomak there."

"Is this true?" the officer asked of Petko. He nodded. The officer turned on the Ethiopian.

"What had you to do with this?" he cried; and before the wretched man could answer he seized him by the collar, lifted him from the ground, shook him like a dog shakes a rat, and flung him away. The man whirled through the air turning over and



over and struck the ground a full fifteen feet distant. The officer then seized the Pomak's fallen gun and with it unmercifully belaboured the owner till the butt broke and the wretch was rolling on the ground screaming for mercy, the officer threw away the gun and stamped on the man, breaking his ribs, then turning his back on the victim he struck out at the

onlookers with a short cane, they fled in all directions.

When he had glutted his wrath he came back and bending over Petko said in pure Serbian—

"Why won't you go?"

Petko answered.

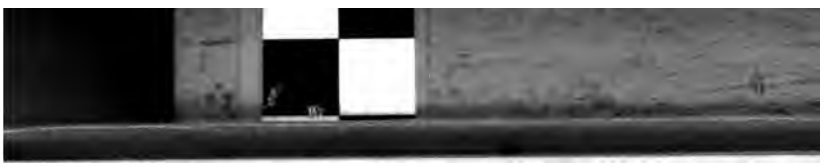
"One foot have I in the grave. I cannot walk with the other."

"Take him back to the Mudir," ordered the officer, "and say that Bimbashi Moushavitch of Nicksitch says that he cannot walk."

The policeman raised him up and carried him back to the prison. The news soon ran about the prison, for prisons in the east are gossipy places, and two Greeks released during the afternoon carried the report into the town, with the result that next day a kvass from the Montenegrin Consul came accompanied by another Montenegrin and demanded to see the prisoner. The official refused to admit them, but upon pressure and bribery they at last were admitted to a small window through which they could see and converse with the unfortunate prisoner.

Petko was in his usual position, half-squatting, half-leaning in an angle of the cell, his head was swathed in a white rag, than which his face was no 'ess blanched.

"Ah," exclaimed the kvass, "it is surely a ghost, that is no living man."



"It is a man, though not for long," answered Petko. "Who are you and why do you come to torment me?"

"Be of good heart, brother," returned the kvass, "I am a kvass from the Montenegrin Consul. Rumour has spoken of you and your sufferings. He would know who you are, and where do you come from?"

"I am a Montenegrin born," answered Petko untruthfully. "I was born near Grahavo, my name is Milan Markovitch, but while I was yet young my father went into Bulgaria as a house-painter. I was a bit wild, and at last joined the Bulgarian army as a volunteer, but an officer and I quarrelled about a girl; I struck him, and I fled into the Vilayet of Adrianople to escape punishment. I knew that Bulgarians were following me, for he was very wealthy, and he had sworn to have me back. When the Turkish soldiers came, in the dark, I thought them Bulgars and so I shot and ran. Since then they have wounded me twice, they have dragged me in irons across this country, they have broken my ribs, and here, because I fell too ill to walk, they have tried to starve me to death. Yesterday they would have killed me, but Bimbashi Moushavitch saved my life. I am not grateful for that, because if I must die, I would die quickly, but he also beat my tormentors and for that I thank him."

He ceased, almost exhausted. The kvass and



his companion had been making exclamations of horror and of pity.

"Will you let me have your papers, and I will give them to my master?" said the kvass. "It is an outrage."

"I have no papers, how should I?" returned Petko. "I left Montenegro while yet young."

The kvass stretched out his hand through the grille.

"Here is money, poor brother," he said. "Get yourself something to eat. My master will come to-morrow."

The Consul was a Montenegrin, son of Petko Kovachovitch the great brigand, and when he heard the kvass' report he delayed not, but appeared at the prison that very afternoon, with the Belgian Consul and the Russian, then the Bimbashi was summoned and came too, with other officers and the Mudir. These people filled the wretched cell, the Belgian and the Russian especially coughing and making faces at the intolerable stench of the place.

Petko repeated his story. The Consul made him repeat the name of his fictitious father, and the place where he was born, and several other details all of which Petko manufactured with cool assurance. Then the Consul asked—

"And why did the gaoler maltreat you in this cruel manner? Have you any explanation?"



Suddenly Petko saw a means to be revenged, force he could not use. . . .

"Certainly," he answered. "It was because I refused to turn Turk."

The gaoler's mouth fell open with astonishment.

"Turn Turk?" repeated the Belgian Consul.

"Yes," repeated Petko, "every day he would come to me and say, 'Giaour, turn Turk or you will get no food,' and when I refused he starved me."

The gaoler stepped forward, he slapped his chest with flat palms.

"Honesty and Truth, Effendi, I did not," he cried.

Petko stared him between the eyes.

"You lie, you know you did," he snarled.

The Mudir frowned on the unhappy gaoler.

"Did you do that?" he asked sternly.

"Honesty and Truth, I did not," returned the gaoler. The sudden and unexpected accusation had confused him somewhat, a fact of which Petko took immediate advantage.

"One can see that he is lying," he retorted with calmness. "Look at him, gentlemen."

Beneath the concentrated stare of the authorities, the gaoler's protestations became only more confused and incredible.

"Take away his keys," ordered the Mudir, glad that the tempest had been diverted from his own head, half suspecting the truth, yet willing to

sacrifice the gaoler to save himself, "and lock him up. You are here to obey our orders, not to add others of your own."

Protesting, the unlucky man was dragged from the cell by the guards. The Mudir turned to the Consuls.

"Now that this unfortunate occurrence has been cleared up, I hope, Effendi, that you can leave this in our hands."

"We will return the day after to-morrow," said the Montenegrin Consul, handing a gold piece to Petko. They filed out one by one, at last only the Bimbashi was left. He shut the door.

He said—

"Brother, I would like to save your life, and if you will go from here, you will, I hope, recover. If you will consent to walk as far as the Uskub gate, I will give orders to my men—you will be taken by my own soldiers—that they shall find you a conveyance, and I will write a letter to Uskub that you shall be well treated and well fed till you come to Andrievitza."

Petko did not answer. The colonel went on.

"Do not trust to the Consuls. Now they are all pity for they have just seen you, but they have much to do, in the wheels of an empire you are but a speck of dust, easily forgotten, easily ground to powder. I have taken a liking to you, and I would regret if you refused this chance when it is offered."



Petko nodded.

"I will go," he said, "because you have saved my life, and because you wish it. I had thought to die here. . . ."

"In Montenegro you will get better," said the Bimbashi shaking his hands.

CHAPTER XVIII

INTO MONTENEGRO

EARLY the next morning four mounted Turkish gendarmes took Petko away from the gaol where he had suffered so much. He could only stumble along, but his hands were not chained, and by holding to the stirrup-leathers he succeeded at last in reaching the gates and passing for ever from the dreadful city. A hundred yards or so outside the gates the guards halted.

"Sit down, Montenegrin," they said, "soon we will have a conveyance for thee."

Petko sat down willingly, he was tired already, and every bone ached with the exertion of his staggering voyage. The day was early, a few Turkish merchants passed, riding high on their fast walking ponies, at length an old Macedonian hove into view, perched on the pack saddle of an enormous donkey.

"Here comes thy steed, Montenegrin," said one of the policemen.

The old Macedonian seemed to Petko at least a hundred years old but the guards stopped him.

"Hey, greybeard, get off the donkey, we have



need of him," they cried. The old man looked piteously at the Turks, but dared make no objection, and heaved his aged limbs from the wooden pack saddle. Petko would have protested, but he reflected, "If I say anything perhaps they will lose their tempers and then I will get no animal at all," and he scrambled on to the hard saddle while the decrepit owner staggered in the rear, sometimes holding on to the ropes of the saddle to help his old feet along the rutty road.

Spring was just breaking, the bushes and trees were shaded in veils of thin green, there were little sparkles of early flowers in the grass. Petko, resting his weary bones on the pack saddle, swung to and fro, half dozing with the monotonous rhythm of the donkey's movement. The air was fresh, there was still the faint refreshing bite of winter in the breeze.

They passed the first village without a stop, but not the second; early in the afternoon they halted at a rich farm, rendering the exhausted old man his donkey and ushering Petko into the large and comfortable living room. The Macedonian owner came forward, bowing with his hand on his chest in token of servitude, smiling on his face although God knows what hate was concealed in his heart.

"Ha!" shouted the leading policeman. "Good evening, Domachin. Bring us pilaf, and roasted chickens, milk, eggs, and cheese, your best; and straw to sleep upon, you understand."

The man bowed in assent, knowing that his unceremonious guests would pay him nothing. Two young women came forward with water with which the men might wash their hands; though they were Christians their faces were veiled, for all feared the lascivious eye of the Turk, and instead of the Serbian skirt they wore big bloomers of flowered cotton. Coffee also was brought and the Turks ordered rakia for Petko, though they would not drink themselves. The Macedonian cast looks of pity at Petko's gaunt face and plied him with the good things, and bringing a special heavy wine, pure and rough to over-sophisticated palates, for him to drink, and in the evening preparing him a deep bed of straw on which to rest himself. He awoke the next day very refreshed, and early the cavalcade set out towards Uskub.

During the journey Petko could see the treatment of the Macedonians by the Turkish gendarmes, and often his anger was almost boiling over, but he restrained it. His own conveyance, whether horse, mule, donkey, or carriage, was commandeered from the passers by, no matter in which direction it was going, and often the unfortunate owner was forced a full day's journey in a direction opposite to that on which he had set forth. At midday and in the evening the Turks would demand "Ekmeck," meaning bread, but woe betide the unfortunate or mean "raia" who would take this in a literal sense. Flogging came easily.



The Macedonian's skin was never very distant from the Turkish rods, and he must needs walk warily, each traveller must stop on the roadside, and salute deeply while the conquerors rode by, each mounted man must dismount from his pack saddle horse and also give his humble salutation. They were forced to pay a very heavy tax instead of military service and the richer farmers were also forced to buy protection from some strong Turk of his district, in order to avoid incessant brigandage and robbery; though rich men were few, for the people were for the most part poor and even if wealthy dressed like beggars to avoid exactions.

The Macedonians themselves he marked as a saving race of good workmen, strict in their religion, observant of fasts and very careful of the morality of the women; many were of fine physique, though naturally the most bold had rebelled and were amongst either the Serbian or Bulgarian comitaji. None could carry arms for they were slaves; against Turks they possessed no legal rights though the Turkish magistrates consented to carry on justice between each Macedonian, this was so subject to bribery that little real right was to be found.

In a week Petko had arrived at Uskub and was lodged in the gaol high up in the "grad" or fortress on the rocky cliff overhanging the river. On the road his guards had treated him kindly, putting no fetters on him, and in health he was a whit better, though not much stronger.



From Uskub he passed to Kachanik, through the pass into the great plain of Kossovo, from Kachanik to Ferosivitch, from Ferosivitch to Vouchitern, from Vouchitern to Pristina.

Between Vouchitern and Pristina he passed the Tourbe, the tombs of the kings at Kossovo, where Murad and Czar Lazar were buried and whence Serbia had drawn all the legends which have—sung by blind bards—kept her soul alive through the long years of captivity and Turkish oppression. This is not the place to digress on the subject, though the Turks and Albanians told Petko as he passed many tales and legends which are not in the Serbian "Romance," the figure of Milosh Obilitch especially has swollen to gigantic proportions—and from Pristina he came to Mitrovitza.

At Mitrovitza he was forced to buy Albanian clothes for the following mountain passes were dangerous, no Serb of Macedonia could come through them with his life, and in addition it was necessary to gain the protection of some well-known Albanian chieftain who would give what is called a "Besa," a promise of peace in which he makes himself responsible for the safety of the traveller, and will revenge any injury done to him. After some difficulty Yussuf Ismail, a member of the Kassnich tribe, consented to accompany the guards and they set off from Mitrovitza, arriving after two days in the town of Ipek on the night preceding Good Friday.



As Petko entered the Ipek gaol Yussuf came to him and said—

"Milan, I like you. If the wealthy Serbs here will guarantee you, I will get permission for you to be free till Easter Sunday so that you may attend your church. Stay in gaol this night and I will see what I can do."

After the usual formalities, he was passed into the prison.

In the large cell were ten men, and amongst them, seated on a bed—his own property—with thick mattresses and many pillows and cushions about him was an enormous Albanian chief, Bhayram Hadjia. As Petko entered the chief fixed him with his eyes and rising from his couch came forwards and shook hands gravely.

"I can see you have suffered much," he said, looking into Petko's face. "Take my bed, it is at your service."

Petko made a grateful movement. "Thank you, Hadjia," he replied. "I will not take your bed. I am so caked with vermin that I should defile it. Give me a wooden seat."

Bhayram Hadjia reseated himself, and the two conversed. The Albanian was in gaol because of a murder, he was a rough customer, but the Turks now wanted to release him; however many blood feuds were on his hands, and all his enemies had gathered about the outskirts of the town, waiting for his exit when they would kill him. He had

requested the Turks to hold him prisoner till his own tribe could come to escort him across the danger zone, and with the patriarchal complaisance of Eastern natives the Turks had consented to prolong his sentence till more convenient times.

Several rich Serbs came in, first bowing profoundly to the Hadjia, and asked Petko questions, to whom Petko replied with his usual fairy tale,



of his Montenegrin parentage, and other inventions. They wished also to know if he had kept the fast.

Now, Petko had not, his digestion was at that moment working on the good food with which the Turks had supplied it. But he replied indignantly that he was a good Christian, and what could they think. So they presented him with tobacco, honey-bread, and unsweetened plum preserve, promising



to interview the Bishop on his behalf, and to see if he could not be allowed some liberty until Easter Sunday.

Bhayram Hadjia broke in—

"Bring the man clothes and blankets, that is what he needs. He is caked with lice, and eaten up by vermin."

A man was sent, and soon Petko was reclothed and sleeping; from eight in the evening till eight of the next day, he lay like a log without a move. The Bishop himself interceded for him, but the Vitzi Pasha refused to let him free, saying that only the Sultan could do it.

On Easter Sunday the Bishop sent a good dinner to all the Serbian prisoners and a special present of thirty medjia (about £5 10s.) for Petko, and for five nights and days he remained in Ipek, well treated by all, and especially by Bhayram Hadjia. One afternoon as he was sitting by the window he saw a big man with trailing black moustaches approaching. The man came quite close, and stared at Petko for a while.

"Ha!" he said at last, "you are Montenegrin."

"How?" replied Petko.

The gipsy answered—

"I have fought with the Montenegrins, I know their eyes. I see you a skeleton, the flesh on you is like the flesh of death, but in your eyes burns an unquenchable fire. Then I say you are Montenegrin."

"Are the Montenegrins so brave?" asked Petko.

"I will tell you what came to me," replied the gipsy. "Once I was in battle with the Montenegrins, and I had chopped off the heads of two."

"Were they dead before?" asked Petko.

"Yes," replied the gipsy, "but as I was carrying the heads, a great man came over the mountain against me. He ran towards me down the hill, his yataghan was whistling in the air a tune of death, and the wind was in his long moustaches. As soon as I looked in his eyes, I felt already half dead with fear. I thought of nothing, I forgot my weapons, only I wished him to kill me quickly. He came up to me, and cried—

"'Tell me who you are.' (For they of great family fight only with the great or noble.)

"Trembling, I answered—

"'I am not Kouchevitch (son of old house), I am not Orjekovitch (son of old chimney), I am a poor devil of a black gipsy.'

"He thrust his sword again into his sheath and answered—

"'I will not foul my knife with your blood.'

"And he turned his back upon me, though I had all my weapons. I was furious, not because I was not killed, but because, having all my weapons, he had turned his back upon me as though I were dirt.



"So, when I saw your burning eyes, I remembered, and I said, 'That man is surely a Montenegrin.'"

The next day Petko was taken by the mountain passes to the village of Rozaj, the Rugovo mountains being impassable, for the Albanians were fighting in the district.

At Rozaj the gaol was useless, the day before the prisoners therein having made a great hole in the wall had escaped, and even then the Zaptiehs were over the country, scouring for them. So they put him into the gendarmes' house, where one lay ill, placing a collar about his neck, and chaining him to the leg of the invalid's bed with a chain of about a hundred pounds in weight which forced him, weak as he was, to lie at full length on the floor. The Turk on the bed began to show off, and to boast.

He cried—

"How do you feel, 'Raia'?" (slave).

Petko retorted—

"I never was a Raia. I am a Montenegrin and never were Montenegrins Raia. My grandmother never cooked 'sitzwarra' for your grandfather, and my grandfather never exercised your horses."

The Turk burst into a mouthful of curses. But a man strode into the room.

"What is the quarrel?" he inquired, and Petko browbeat the ill Turk till he confessed he was in the wrong.

"What is your name?" demanded then the man, who was a Turkish county magistrate.

"My name is Milan Markovitch," replied Petko. "I was born in a small village north of Nicksitch. My father was a farmer."

"And your father's name?" asked the man.

"Milosh Markovitch," replied Petko.

The man held out his hand.

"Boy," he said, "I knew your father."

Petko stared.

"Yes. Milosh Markovitch of Nicksitch. Oh, I knew him. We have fought one against the other. Why, Yevtin, your uncle, and I—did they never tell you the tale? We were fighting near Velstovo, and we had carried off the cattle. There were twenty of us, and your uncle Yevtin—the best fighter I ever met—with only three men cut us off. We had to fight. I was wounded, three others were killed, but not a mark did we get on to any of the four Montenegrins, and they went back with the cattle. Oh, it was a fine fight."

He paused for a moment.

"See here, Serb. You give me 'Besa' and I'll take off that heavy neck band."

Petko promised and the Turk went away with the encumbering neck chains, returning with a small child of twelve years old, whom he introduced as his daughter, and a pillow.

"Have you had supper?" he demanded.



"I have had a little bread," answered the prisoner.

The man went out, returning with a Turkish stew, and tobacco, sugar, and a brazier on which he set a coffee pot. Every now and again he went out, but returned, talking of the old time in Montenegro, before the Turks had been driven from Nicksitch.

"And how many brothers had you?" asked the man suddenly.

Petko took thought.

"But you knew us?" he objected.

"No," replied the man. "I left before your father was married."

"Ah," said Petko with relief. "There were four of us. Yovan, and Yevtin—after my uncle—and myself and Ilya."

The man nodded.

"Well, tell your uncle that you met me, Moushavitch."

"Moushavitch," replied Petko. "Are you related to a Colonel Moushavitch of police at Saloon (Salonica)?"

"My cousin," returned the other.

"He saved my life," replied Petko, and told the story.

Early the next morning, taking leave of the hospitable Moushavitch, Petko and his guards set out across the passes to Berane. Fifteen soldiers were marching to the frontier to change the guard,

so they went in company, coming in the afternoon, to Trpeze, where they met the gendarmes who had come from Berane. Petko's guards handed him over, taking a receipt, and for a while soldiers, gendarmes and prisoners sat in the lee of a farm-house, while the farmer plied them with distilled pear water.

The afternoon quiet was suddenly broken by a shrill crying which wailed down from the high hillside above. The Turks turned one to another, saying—

"Some one is killed."

The wailing increased, terrible in its heartrending agony. Petko thought that even the rocks must be moved. A slow procession of Albanians, bearing between them a headless corpse, filed down the mountain side. A woman walking beside with wild gestures of grief was keening out her bitter pain in a rude poetical lament—

> "Oh, my beloved falcon,
> The godless have slain thee,
> To thy poor mother is left nothing,
> For no son have I to avenge thee."

They placed the body on the ground and soon a goodly gathering of Albanians was about it, the terrible cries of the stricken mother moving them to deep wrath.

"Who has done this thing?" cried the soldiers.

"He is an Adrovitch," answered some, "their blood-feud enemies, the Serbian Pantovitch, have



killed him. An only son, a nice boy, but you knew him."

"None have I to avenge thee. No son remains to me," wailed the mother.

"We will be thy sons," cried the Albanians, "we will revenge thee," and they crossed their yataghans over the dead body. The soldiers sat about watching, then the corporal said—

"One more cigarette, then we go."

The Albanians were still holding their knives and guns over the dead youth, but one came towards the police and said, pointing to Petko—

"Who is that man?"

The head gendarme, nicknamed Bouto, for his face was marked with smallpox, answered—

"He is a Montenegrin we are taking to Andrievitza."

The Albanian shouted.

"Evo nam ga" (here is one).

His yataghan flashed from his sheath.

"Brothers," he cried, "here is a cursed Serb; we can revenge our brother, while yet his blood is warm."

The other Albanians moved up threateningly.

Bouto cried to the sergeant, "For the Sultan's bread, do not let him have my prisoner, do not let him cut off my nose."

The sergeant snapped out a word of command. The soldiers fell on their knees, rifles presented The sergeant then cried—


UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
3 9015 04768 5923



DO NOT REMOVE
OR
MUTILATE CARDS